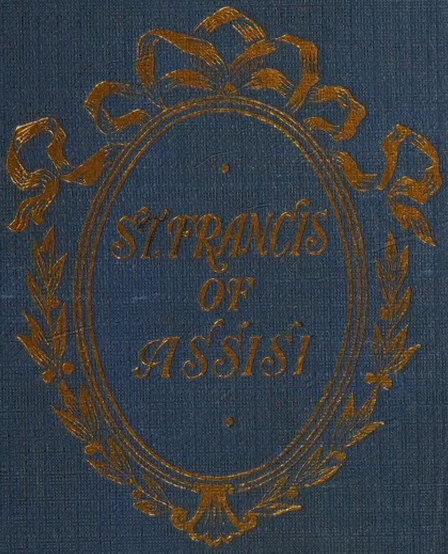
ST. FRANCIS
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A sympathetic and inspiring treatment of the life of St. Francis, sketched picturesquely on the medieval background in which he lived. The development of the merry, prank-loving boy, ring-leader of his wild companions, into the gentle, humble friar is one of the most kindling spiritual records in the history of the Christian church. His personal simplicity and the unique joy which he made the basis of his order are treated with a touch which makes the character live and glow before the reader. The book gives a clear picture of the early days of the Franciscans.

ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

St Francis and the Birds

ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

BY

E. M. WILMOT-BUXTON, F.R.Hist.S.

AUTHOR OF
"THE STORY OF JEANNE D'ARC" "ANSELM"
"BRITAIN LONG AGO" "TOLD BY THE NORTHMEN"
ETC.

WITH NINE ILLUSTRATIONS

NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
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The Authorized American Edition
Published, 1926, by
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgment

MY thanks and acknowledgments for permission to quote from copyright works are due to Messrs Blackwell (Oxford), for the poem " Assisi," by E. G. S., in *At a Venture*; to Mr J. Slingsby Roberts, for extracts from his translation of the *Canticle of the Sun* and the *St Clare* of Jacopone da Todi; to Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., for extracts from *The Friars* and *Life of St Francis*; to Messrs Fisher Unwin, for an extract from Jusserand's *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*; and to the Catholic Truth Society, for extracts from their translation of the *Fioretti*.

E. M. W.-B.

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CHAPTER I: *The Days of Strife*

When God made lovely Italy
The fairest of all lands to be
With glowing skies and soil and sea
. . . .
He sent His Herald of Peace in days
Of warring factions, faith outworn,
And so Assisi saw one morn
The dearest Saint of all saints born.

E. G. S., *Assisi*

IN the closing years of the twelfth century a wealthy merchant of the name of Pietro Bernadone dwelt with his family in a substantial white house within the walls of Assisi. A fair heritage was his, this home which his young wife managed so well, and which was always gay with the merry voices of his children. From its white terrace it looked down upon the plain of Umbria, dotted with vineyards and the silver-grey of olive-trees, which stretched in crimson fields of clover and golden corn to far blue distances of hills. In steep ranges rose the hills as far as Bernadone's eye could reach, and beyond them still in fancy he saw the domes and cupolas of Rome.

On the grey flanks of these slopes the cities of Umbria could faintly be descried—the towers of Montefalco, the terraces of Spello—and high above them, crowning a mountain-peak, Perugia, the Papal City, rival and foe of Assisi for many a generation, menaced her across the plain.

On those long, lovely evenings of the Italian summer such a scene was bathed in calm; and yet

to the mind of the merchant of Assisi it suggested thoughts of tumult and conflict rather than of peace.

Many a time had his father seen that smiling plain red with blood—the blood of men of Perugia and Assisi fighting for once on the same side against the "abhorred Germans."

For the century so nearly at an end had seen much, though not the whole, of the long conflict between Popes and Emperors that had divided Italy into the two great factions of Guelphs and Ghibellines, under their respective war-cries of Church and State. But though, speaking generally, the quarrel turned upon the question as to whether Pope or Emperor was to be supreme, many another cause of discord arose from time to time. And though Italy, by reason of her geographical relation to Rome and Germany, was the chief battle-ground of the conflict, nearly every country in Europe was affected by it. Even England, so far in those days from the centre of Christendom, had borne her share; and Bernadone, riding over the Alps through France and Spain upon his business as wool-merchant, could scarcely fail to have heard of Anselm and Rufus, Thomas Becket and Henry of Anjou, those mighty protagonists in the long contest between Church and king.

Now Bernadone, being a shrewd and thoughtful man of affairs, and much given to drawing conclusions from what he heard and saw, would probably sum up the meaning of the great conflict something in this fashion.

It was not merely a struggle as to who should be master—Church or State, Pope or Emperor, bishop or king—it was rather a new manifestation of the

oldest story in the world, the struggle between good and evil in the heart of man.

In the beginning the Church stood for an ideal society—the world of spirit as opposed to the world of matter—her work was to hold up an example before mankind which should remind men, even in their busiest days, of the great facts of Eternity. The more her influence could be extended over the State, the closer would that State approach the ideal, and the more independent the latter became, the weaker would be her hold upon the 'things that matter.' This was, roughly speaking, the view of the more spiritual-minded partisan of Rome in those days. Unfortunately this view was clouded and obscured by the fact that the Church had, to a very great extent, ceased to be in any way an ideal society. Even the most devout of her children saw how her demands for temporal as well as spiritual power were tending to degrade her aims ; so that the question was complicated not so much by the rival claims of Roman pontiff and German Emperor as by another struggle, within the Church itself, between spiritual aims and worldly ambitions.

At one time, Bernadone would recall, the solution of the problem seemed to lie with the monastic orders. The monks of St Benedict, spreading throughout Europe from the walls of Cluny, had done a great work in setting up high ideals of Christian life both in the political and social spheres. They had taught the meaning of law to the wild nations of the North, and had brought about the civilization of Europe. And the Order had, moreover, in later days produced Hildebrand, the Pope who had dared to assert the

claims of spiritual supremacy in the teeth of a mighty Emperor, Henry IV, and had brought him to the very dust. But now the glory of the older religious orders had waxed dim. The monk was still a learned scholar or a courtly gentleman, but he had ceased to influence the age in which he lived, and a vast gulf yawned between the monastery and the ever-increasing middle and lower class of citizens—the merchant, the soldier, the pedlar, the *jongleur*.

Hence, since the true strength of the Church lay in her moral influence over the lay men and women who were her children, when she lost that she bade fair to lose all.

What was needed was a body of men, not enclosed within monastery walls, but living and moving in the world, who were yet not of the world; men who, while independent of the State, combined in themselves its best features; men who might bring the ideal society represented by the Church not so much before the eyes of the world, as *into* that world itself, by their personal influence and example. These men, the 'militia' of the Church as they might well be called, would get into closer touch with mankind than could any cloistered monk. Theirs also would be the threefold vow which should show the advantages of law and order in a disordered society: the vow of Obedience, which corresponded to the code drawn up by the State, the vow of Chastity, corresponding to the standard of morality enforced by the State, the vow of Poverty, going even farther than the State, which demanded that the rights of fellow-men should be respected.

But beyond all this there was a crying need that

men such as these should be men of vision, men who had seen the snow-clad peaks of the mountain-top, and knew how to point the way thither; men, moreover, who had seen the vision of a universal brotherhood, in the light of which such sordid struggles as were dividing the Europe, as well as the Italy, of that period should pass for ever.

Was this the dream of Pietro Bernadone as he mused upon the white-terraced house perched up in the eagle's nest of Assisi? Was he awakened from it by the merry shouts of his little son in the courtyard below? Did he talk of these things to his wife in the hearing of young Francis when the child was supposed to be absorbed in his play? These are questions that no one can answer, but one thing seems certain enough. In his wildest dreams the good Bernadone never thought that here, close at hand, lay the answer to one of his problems; that in the years to come a band of friars—the "brothers of mankind"—was to go forth carrying to men a new ideal of life that was yet the oldest of all; and that the name of the founder of that order would be one Francis 'of Assisi.'

Certainly the time was ripe for reform. The growth of the 'commune,' the revolt of the citizen against the noble, the unrest that was finding vent in the Crusades, all told the same story of movement and change. The souls of men yearned for satisfaction, as their bodies experienced comforts of food and clothing unknown to their forbears. A spirit of divine discontent was in the air, and when men cried for bread it was too often merely a stone that was vouchsafed.

So the struggle went on for civic freedom, for wealth, for power, and men vied with each other as to who should be master; and meanwhile the gates of the city were thronged with lepers, the unheeded offspring of dirt and disorder, and children starved, and mothers wept in poverty and pain. For the world was fast losing its hold on the ideals of love and peace and brotherhood, and cared more for the independence of its communes than lives of fellow-creatures.

It was in the midst of these things that the little Francis, eldest son of Pietro Bernadone, first saw the light in the year 1182.

As far as actual history was concerned, it was a stirring time. In France Philip II had lately ascended the throne, and was bent on raising his country to a dazzling height of power. His hands were at present full with the task of subduing his haughty barons, and soon were to be busier still with the preparations for the Third Crusade. But by his building work in Paris, his improvements in her once filthy streets, and above all by the foundation of the Louvre, he was to win a more enduring reputation than by the sword.

In England the last years of Henry II were drawing to a close, and the sceptre was about to pass to his two sons. Of these, Richard was to spend the most of his reign far away from England, and so during the greater part of the life of Francis John was ruler of England. And thence would come news of a struggle between Church and king which, on a small scale, reproduced that contest which had enveloped Europe for more than a century.

In Germany, to come nearer home, the reign of

Frederick Barbarossa came to an end when Francis was a child of some eight years. Fierce had been his demand for overlordship of Italy in the teeth of pontiff and bishop, yet he had not triumphed over the Church he scorned. After his long years of revolt he had been compelled to make peace with a Pope he had sworn never to recognize, and for the last fourteen years of his life had acknowledged him as overlord.

His son, Henry VI, was still obsessed with the ambition to make the power of the Church subordinate to the Empire, but he was content to try to bring it about by small counter-strokes rather than by open revolt. It was with his sanction and support that the barons of Germany, little better than freebooters, managed to establish a hold on certain cities of Italy, even when the province to which they belonged was under the rule of the Holy See.

Thus, for example, a certain Conrad, who had been created by Barbarossa Count of Assisi, was encouraged by Henry to bring the commune under German rule, and to take up his abode as its suzerain in the grim citadel called the Rocca which, like a menacing weapon, overhung the little town.

It only needed that Innocent III should become Pope in the year after Henry's death (1197) to bring about a complete revolution of the wheel. The Emperor's son was a babe in arms, and by a curious turn of events had been placed by his mother under the guardianship of Innocent himself; and the latter at once began his policy of joining all the smaller states together against the menace of the Empire, and ejecting their German rulers.

Francis Bernadone would have been a boy of sixteen when the glad news ran through Assisi that Conrad was making no resistance to the papal claims, and was preparing to leave the city without delay.

The citizens went well-nigh mad with joy. Never again, they swore, should their commune be threatened by that castle set upon a rock. No doubt the boy Francis was one of those who swarmed up the steep ascent, and with whatever weapon came handiest helped to raze the hated citadel to the ground. In vain came the thunders of papal denunciation declaring that the Rocca was the property of Rome and must be rebuilt. The men of Assisi only laughed, and set about building a wall of defence round their city with the stones of the vanished castle.

All over Tuscany similar scenes were taking place in that year of liberation 1198, when a wave of triumphant freedom rolled to the very steps of the Chair of St Peter. But the head of the Ghibelline party was only scotched, not killed, and within a few months Philip, uncle of the infant heir of the Empire, was claiming the Empire's crown. He was elected Emperor, but no sooner was this accomplished than the Archbishop of Cologne at once set up a rival in the person of Otto, son of Henry the Lion, a strong representative of the Guelph faction, who now appeared as the champion of the Church.

So war broke out anew, while Pope Innocent looked on in silence, and England supported Otto, and France the cause of Philip. Philip was the stronger, and a year later he threatened to invade the very walls of Rome. A weak Pope would have quailed before the threat. Innocent hurled upon him the

thunders of the Church, and after a fresh outbreak of war found himself in the position he had aimed at from the first. The rival princes had to be content to place their respective claims in his hands, and ask him to decide between them.

So once more the Pope stood firm for the right of election to the Empire ; and his choice naturally fell upon Otto, that loyal son of the Church.

But Philip had many strong supporters, among them most of the bishops, on his side ; he would not accept the papal decision, and for ten years more the war raged on, leaving Italy in an indescribable state of unrest and constant bloodshed. Even when at length Philip managed to win Innocent to his cause, his enjoyment of the position of Emperor was brief enough. He was stabbed by a follower of the Guelph faction, Otto, Count of Wittelsbach, in the July of 1208, and a Guelph Emperor ruled the Empire in place of a Ghibelline.

An extraordinary scene of violence marked his coronation at St Peter's, Rome. Innocent had given him warm welcome, but the citizens of Rome would have no German Emperor crowned within their walls. Romans and Germans slew each other in the streets of the Holy City, and Otto, glad of a pretext to throw off the papal yoke, drew off his troops from Rome only to seize the cities of Tuscany once more.

From the Chair of St Peter Innocent III solemnly excommunicated the rebel, Guelph though he was, in the Holy Week of 1211 ; and from that hour it seemed that the fortunes of Otto began to turn.

From the groves of beautiful Palermo was summoned presently a boy of seventeen, grandson of

Barbarossa, the papal ward of bygone years; and to him Innocent offered the Imperial crown. Accepting at once, the young Frederick was crowned in his Sicilian garden, and immediately hastened with a few knights north to Rome, and thence to Constance. This city, ruled by its bishop, was the key to the Empire; upon it Otto was marching with his troops, confident of the bishop's support. By a swift dash forward, Frederick reached the city first, and in the three hours at his disposal so worked upon the bishop that he closed the gates of Constance upon the approaching Otto.

The flowing tide was with the young Emperor. The bishops of the Empire followed the lead of Constance; Philip of France was, as usual, on the side of a Ghibelline. The battle of Bouvines, 1214, made France all-powerful at that moment; and a Ghibelline Emperor, chosen and crowned by the Pope, held the imperial throne once more.

Throughout these troubled years of fighting and of faction runs like a thread of gold the story of St Francis—the "Little Poor Man of God"—of whom as yet we have had but a glimpse within the white walls of Assisi.

Brief as has been our glance over the history of his time during the first thirty years of his life, it should suffice to remind us of what must have been the social conditions at such a period. It was a time of strong contrasts. The unceasing quarrels of feudal lords, Ghibelline against Guelph, turned their retainers into the most unscrupulous marauders, a constant pest, and one ever to be reckoned with. And yet, while rights of property were necessarily so uncertain,

we find a very steady growth in the demands of the tradesmen for civic rights and mutual protection.

Then again we find a vast increase in luxury and easy living among those who had learnt to appreciate the fine cloth and worked metals of the East ; houses were built with an eye to beauty as well as comfort ; and yet the alleys of the town and the gates of the city were thronged with lepers and stained with disease and filth to an indescribable degree.

It was the day of Romance literature, when knightly poems and the tales of troubadours and *jongleurs* were on many a lip ; but the ordinary people could not read a word, and were extraordinarily ignorant even of the faith that meant so much to them.

It was a time of bloodshed, of rapine, of absolute insecurity of goods and life ; yet never perhaps in history do we find a spirit of such lighthearted mirth, such joy in life, such appreciation of the simple happenings of every day, as in these years which belong to what some have called the " Dark Ages," and some, with clearer vision, the " Age of Faith."

CHAPTER II: *The Golden Youth of Assisi*

Liberalis et hilaris. (Freehanded and gay.)
The Three Companions of St Francis

LEGENDS tender and quaint gathered in later days round the birth of the son of Bernadone. One of these makes the future saint first open his eyes on the world in a stable, amid the sweet breath of the beasts he was to love so well. A mysterious pilgrim had beckoned his mother thither; and there she gave her little son his first kiss. Still may that stable be seen, transformed now into a chapel, the chapel of the Little Saint Francis—*San Francesco il Piccolo*—over the door of which may be read the lines

Hoc oratorium fuit bovis et asini stabulum,
In quo natus est Franciscus, mundi speculum.

(This chapel has been the stable of ox and of ass,
In which was born Francis, that wonder of the world.)

Not far away stood the abode of the Bernadone family, now the site of the Chiesa Nuova. Again, in the cathedral near by we find the legend which tells of the reappearance of the pilgrim at the baptism of the child, whom he held in his arms at the font. Once again he appears, at the door of the house whither the infant had been brought after baptism, demanding to see the babe.

The servant refused; her master was away and the Donna Pica, her mistress, was abed; but when the stranger insisted, and refused to go away till he had his wish, she went to her lady and told her what

had occurred. To her surprise, Donna Pica at once bade her carry the babe to the pilgrim as he stood in the street; whereupon the latter, taking him in his arms, uttered a strange prophecy:

"To-day in this street two children have been born, of whom one, this very child, shall become one of the best men in the world, while the other shall become one of the worst."

Then, making the sign of the Cross over the child, he gave him back to the nurse, bidding her take good care of him, for the devil would do his best to make him his servant.

After that he disappeared, and as he was never seen again it was clear that Assisi had entertained an angel unawares.

Let us leave the quaint medieval stories and come back to facts.

At his baptism the babe had received the name of John. It was the wish of his mother, her mind turning either to that gentle saint who had lain upon his Master's breast, or to the austere Baptist in his hermit's garb. But presently there returned to his home Messer Pietro Bernadone, new come from the gay lands of France, and full of admiration for the good company he had kept there.

The lively babe delighted him hugely. "This shall be no John Baptist dressed in camel's hair," he cried. "No dreaming apostle of love, either. He shall be a Frenchman truly, in gaiety and in name. Let him henceforth be called Francis."

No doubt the Lady Pica smiled and sighed a little over her man's extravagant fancy, never guessing that in the days to come both poverty

and love were to be the characteristics of her "little Frenchman."

As he grew older she watched over him with some anxiety. He was a slender boy, delicate of limb and feature, with the straight nose, smooth low brow, and thin, tapering fingers of the idealist. His dark eyes could be dreamy at times, but more usually were lit up with mirth and enthusiasm; and his clear, musical voice could be heard in merry laughter and chatter from morning till night. But he was a sensitive child, given to strange and pensive moods; and no doubt from his early years he loved in such moods to fling himself at his mother's feet and listen to the quaint legends of Provence, the land of her birth, where she had been wooed and won by the handsome young merchant Bernadone.

Below them, as they sat on the balcony of the living-room, would be the dark old shop, filled with the rich cloths and silks that the merchant brought home from his travels; and from this store Pietro was wont to gather materials bright of hue and soft to the touch wherewith Donna Pica might clothe their first-born. The boy himself delighted in such garb; colour and shape were alike of importance and fostered in him that love of the beautiful that was his strongest characteristic.

The one thing that clouded his gay outlook was the need to repair for some hours a day to the priests of the church of St George, close by, to receive the education befitting the son of a wealthy citizen.

His earliest biographer[1] has drawn a dark picture of the kind of school that young Francis would

[1] Thomas of Celano.

attend. The teaching seems to have been left to lads little older than their pupils, with no idea of education or discipline, who often, indeed, taught things better left unknown. Bad behaviour was encouraged, and the lads vied with one another in appearing more troublesome than they were by nature.

Here Francis would pick up a little Latin, and with it a great dislike for all solid learning. The dark, cramped schoolroom was his abomination, and he was probably not the least unruly of the pupils. But when lessons were over he came into his own domain.

His strong personality, rich dress, and full purse made him, even as a boy, a ruler over his fellows, and it was his delight to marshal them in bands and to lead them through the city bent on daring exploits or on curious adventures. It was then that his real education progressed, and his teachers were many. From his father, who delighted in his boy's daring and masterful ways, he picked up the French language that he talked with such enjoyment and such incorrectness to the end of his life. From his mother, into whose sympathetic ear he poured out his plans and schemes for the next day's enjoyment, he heard of the deeds of romance as they were sung in the songs of Old Provence. But perhaps the most enthralling instructor was he whom the boys would meet from time to time entering the city gates dusty of garb and gay of heart, the wandering minstrel of those medieval days. Round him the lads would gather open-eyed to hear of the deeds of Arthur, the triumphs of Charlemagne, and all the other romances of the days of chivalry. Honoured guest though he

was at the houses of nobles, he would have no more appreciative audience than that little band led by the eager-eyed Francis Bernadone. Song of troubadour, romance of paladin, both alike became closely interwoven with the boy's daily life. The adventures of Arthur were acted again outside the city walls at eventide; songs of battle and of love re-echoed through the courtyard of Bernadone's house till they became part of Francis' very self. It was no trouble to him, idle scholar though he was, to learn by heart these tales of heroes, and to brood over them till the life of chivalric romance became more real to him than that of a citizen in an Italian commune.

No wonder that with such mental food an imaginative, enthusiastic lad pined for the day when he might go forth as knight-errant to fight, maybe, in the Crusade then raging in the East, or to strike a blow for the Church in the conflict against the German hosts then attacking Sicily.

Soon his pretence at schoolwork was over, and he was supposed to aid his father in his business of cloth-merchant. But this only gave him a further chance of carrying out his bent. Pietro Bernadone made his so-called assistance an excuse for filling up the purse of this favoured youngster to the brim, and laughed an appreciative laugh when his neighbours commented on the lad's princely generosity and courtly manners.

"He lives as the son of a prince!" said the citizens, in admiration mingled with disapproval. "Let him —he has the means!" growled the father; but the gentle mother took up the words and astounded his

critics by saying : " I will tell you how this son of mine will turn out : if he lives like a prince now, he will hereafter be a child of God."

The neighbours laughed at a prophecy that went wide of the mark in the case of such a worldling ; but Donna Pica had watched her boy unawares, and had seen his bright eyes soften, his vivid face grow reverent, whenever the name of God was mentioned in his presence.

She knew his love for beauty, his hatred of all that was ugly, mean, or painful ; but she knew too that he never refused alms to the leper he could not bear to look upon, nor to the beggar whose rags were to him an offence.

Meantime the customs of the commune gave him ample scope for the indulgence of expensive tastes. Dream as he might in the daytime, the evening hour brought the time for the revel and the feast. Then would the youth of the town gather round the festal board loaded with food and wine ; hot from this they loved to parade the city, often with fantastic revelling, wild song, and wilder dance.

Here, as always, Francis was the adored leader, first in gorgeous parade, excelling in mad alarms and excursions.

Yet even here a watchful eye might have noted that the grosser side of these revels attracted him not at all. He was dainty at the table, daintier in discourse, " an obscene jest made him silent."

The great festivals of the Church were in those days marked by tournaments and ' courts of love,' where poet and minstrel and champion of sword and lance vied with each other. Here again Francis was

the foremost, most popular of candidates, most fortunate of combatants.

"It will spoil him for a business man!" murmured the critics in the ear of Bernadone; but the good man merely laughed and thought within himself that this chivalric craze was but a boy's whim. It would soon pass into a higher form of ambition that might lead him in days to come to the proud post of ruler of the council, even of consul of the city. His own position as a free citizen and wealthy burgher was as nothing compared with his pride in Francis, the darling of the commune, who might one day make his name famous in all the province of Umbria, and even throughout Italy. This was indeed to be the case, but in a manner very different from anything that Pietro Bernadone could conceive.

So Francis continued to be the acknowledged leader of the wealthy youth of Assisi. We can see him at this time a gallant figure, swaggering through the narrow streets in his brave scarlet and gold at the head of a band of admiring companions; or singing some merry lilt as he races down the steep path that leads from Assisi to the plain below. And yet, in the midst of all this gaiety and irresponsible behaviour, there always seems to have been something of a contrast—no dark shadow, no condemning prick of conscience, but rather a cord of love drawing him gently, and yet with compelling force, in one particular direction.

It is at this period that we hear of the strange whim which led him, laughing the while, to bid his mother have his fine garments lined with coarse, rough sacking. Was this golden youth of Assisi,

Francis and the Beggar

who wore the fantastic dress of a troubadour or the rich tunic of a noble with equal grace, mocking at his own levity ?

Again we see him in another capacity, giving expert advice to the wealthy clients who thronged his father's shop, and selling them yards of the soft and beautiful cloths for which Bernadone was famous. Round him throng his friends, commenting, joking, appraising, when through their midst presses an anxious figure, and a beggar in noisome rags begs money from the young merchant. " For the love of God ! " whines the mendicant. " Begone ! This is no place for you ! " cries Francis, and his boy friends help to chase the unattractive figure from the shop. But when Francis returns to his merchandise his face is overcast, his thoughts distracted. Suddenly he turns away from the busy counter and flings headlong out of the shop and down the street. Money is pressed into the eager hands of the departing beggar, and Francis comes slowly back, " making solemn promise to God that from that day forth he would never refuse an alms to any who should ask it of him for the love of God."

" Why this freak ? " asks a scoffing onlooker ; to which the boy replies vehemently, " Well, if this man had come to me from one of my noble friends to borrow money for him, would he not have got it from me ? But when the man came from the King of Kings and Master of Masters I let him go away with empty hands, and gave him hard words alone."

No doubt the episode ended with a gay laugh at his own seriousness, in order to maintain his pose of fantastic wit. *Liberalis et hilaris*—freehanded and

full of fun—was his epithet in those days, and he was determined to live up to it. But there were times when the spoilt child of Bernadone would slip from his house, and, avoiding the gay companions who were ever ready for his company, would betake himself to a lonely spot outside the city walls, where, stretched upon the warm earth, he could gaze his fill upon the lovely scene stretching for miles below. At a time when human life and character is usually the chief attraction he had a passionate love of nature in all her moods and all her manifestations. The radiant sun of midday, the dim shades of evening, the gorgeous colouring of the Italian countryside, the delicate hue of the olive-leaf, the crisp hillside breeze, and the lowering thunderstorm, all appealed to his homage and affection. Other forms of creation also appealed to him strongly. Animals sought his side instinctively ; the birds were known individually by him, and became his pensioners. It was as though the charming simplicity that underlay his fantastic exterior made him one with all simple forms of life whether in the world of plants or animals. In later days he was to keep this deep attraction for the so-called lower forms of creation, but to hold it transformed into something more intense, more intimate, as known afresh in the light of renunciation.

CHAPTER III: *The Call to Service*

Amore amoris tui mundo moriar qui amore amoris mei dignatus es in cruci mori.

(May I die to the world for love for Thee, Who didst die on the Cross for love of my love.)

Prayer of St Francis

WHEN Francis was about twenty years of age, things occurred which brought him quite suddenly into close touch with the events of the period. It will be remembered that some three or four years before this time the people of Assisi had shown their joy in the eviction of the German Count Conrad by razing the fortress of the Rocca and building with its stones a rampart round their city.

This energetic deed had shown the citizens what power lay in them if they chose to use it; and they proceeded to turn it against certain nobles, petty tyrants, whose fortified castles lay in or about the town. It was, as we have seen, an age of revolt, especially of revolt from feudalism; and the 'common people,' as the barons contemptuously termed the members of the commune, were determined that the latter should come under the civic rule of the place or go. So they attacked their fortresses, and burnt several to the ground. The nobles wished to retaliate, but knew their own weakness too well to attempt anything by themselves. There was, however, a force at hand always ready to join issue against Assisi. Perugia, the city's hereditary foe, gave instant ear to the proposal of the barons that in return

for her aid against the citizens she should become overlord of Assisi, and at once launched her army into the plain between the two towns. Assisi stood in sore peril, for Perugia was then at the height of her resources and strength, but she was not forced to depend only on her citizens. Some few nobles were on her side, and led out her little army to meet the Perugians ; among them, no doubt, were some who had been intimate with the attractive young son of the wealthy Bernadone, and had perhaps borrowed money from him. *Bourgeois* though he was by birth, Francis fought by their side ; for in taking up arms in such a cause we may be sure that impetuous youth was foremost. Here was his first chance of chivalric adventure, and he meant to make the most of it.

But in that battle of St John's Bridge between the two cities in the year 1202 Perugia gained the upper hand ; a large number of nobles and citizens were taken prisoner, and among them was Francis, distinguished no doubt by his rashness in conflict as much as by his eagerness in the fight. The conquest was not by any means complete, however ; Assisi still retained her independence, but meantime, while negotiations were pending, many of her sons lay pining in prison.

It is significant that young Francis, as a matter of course, was shut up with the nobles, not with the ' commoners,' but the year of captivity was not the more endurable for this.

Anyone who has seen the dungeons of a mediæval castle will realize the misery of the cramped space, darkness, damp, and airlessness. Francis' companions grew bitter and ill-tempered, and one of

them so morose that the rest cast him out from their company. But Francis was irrepressible. Instead of avoiding the embittered knight, he sought him out, talked and jested till he had won a reluctant response, brought him back to human intercourse once more. All day long his ringing voice was heard in song, in jest, in merry chatter, till his gloomy companions were forced, almost against their will, to leave sad thoughts and join in the fun. But one was almost proof against him, and accused him of being out of his mind. "None but a mad fellow would be merry in prison!"

"Not at all," came the ready reply. "I can make you all laugh when I will; and, sure enough, in the days to come you will see the whole world paying court to me."

No doubt they scoffed at his ambitious claims; but it served to pass a weary hour. Moreover, anything might be forgiven the youngster by reason of his readiness to amuse them with story, song, or jest. It was the first act of his Apostolate of Joy.

So the long, tedious year passed away, and at the end of it came release for all. The citizens had agreed to restore the fortress and indemnify the barons for the damage done; for the rest, Assisi was to be free as before.

Release from long and wearisome confinement brought with it severe reaction. With reckless zeal young Francis flung himself headlong into a life of extravagant amusement—feasting, dancing, acting—as though he would tear out the very heart of life itself. But his strength, weakened by months of captivity, could not stand the strain for long, and in

the spring of the next year (1204) he fell most seriously ill, and lay for many weeks nigh to death. His mother watched over him with anxious care. If he should recover, would this illness mark a crisis in his career? Would he learn that there was something else in life besides jesting and posing? Yet she, no doubt, was the one who most deplored the change in her darling when first he dragged himself, white and listless, from the house, in order to gaze once more upon the lovely scene, framed by the gateway—the Porta Nuova—that lay below the city. Once that winding road, those misty ranges of hills, those pine-clad slopes and fertile plains had been his ideal of beauty; he had talked of them incessantly on his sick-bed, pictured them with feverish vision. Now, after a long, long look he turned away, sad and disheartened. For him the sweet spring air had no message of hope; the song of the birds no longer thrilled with joy; an intense loneliness of soul and weariness of life had gained possession of him, and as the memory of his former existence returned strong upon him he shuddered with disgust and misery. The world he had loved had failed him, and he knew no other toward which he might turn.

As says his first biographer,[1] "The beauty of the fields, the delight of the vineyards, and all that is fair to the eye, could in no way gladden him; wherefore he was amazed at the change that had befallen him, and thought them most foolish who could love these things."

No doubt much of this world-weariness was the natural *ennui* of convalescence; but even when he

[1] Celano.

recovered his strength those who knew him best noted a change in him. He went back to his old companions, rioted as much as ever, posed, jested, played the buffoon ; but he was restless and unhappy, given to moods of sadness and silence and altogether different from the gay youth of a year ago. Yet religion did not attract him ; if the call had sounded in his ears he did not recognize the voice.

His father, noting the change in the young man, drew his own conclusions. " He finds this life too barren for him. Well, if he wishes it, let him go forth for a while into a wider world. No doubt he will find a wife for himself, and be glad enough to settle down when he has had his fling."

So when the opportunity came for escape no parental opposition barred the way.

For the last seven years a struggle for the regency of the kingdom of Sicily had been raging between the Empire and the Papacy ; and of late fresh interest had been brought to it by the advent of Walter de Brienne as champion of the cause of Pope Innocent. De Brienne was a Norman knight whose deeds had already made him a perfect hero of romance ; he stood now for the cause of chivalry in opposition to that of the hated Germans. It happened that one of the nobles of Assisi, who probably had shared the lot of prisoner with young Francis, was about to set out with his armed troop of retainers to join the forces of Walter de Brienne. Here was an opportunity not to be lost. To take service with this knight would bring Francis into the very heart of chivalric adventure, and he lost no time in making preparation for the exploit. His father, delighted to find him

keenly interested once again in life, gave him unlimited command of money, and his equipment frankly rivalled that of the nobleman under whose banner he was to fight. As for himself, his absorption and delight in the smallest details of preparation were unbounded. He ran from one narrow street to another as though life were not long enough to walk ; his gay voice rang through the house as he recounted his future hopes and expectations. Even his lively companions were amazed at his excitement, and at length demanded the reason for such high spirits.

" It is because I *know*," cried Francis, with kindling eyes, " that I am going to be one day a great prince."

Yet even in the midst of such a time of unrestraint there comes an incident that marks the inconsistency of his apparent worldliness.

One day he met a young nobleman with whom he had some slight acquaintance, and found that he also was preparing his equipment for the same expedition. With a pride that had even in its simplicity some touch of ostentation, the merchant's son showed his own rich array. The other looked at it wistfully, and pointing to his poor and meagre trappings said : " That is all I can afford for myself."

At once Francis insisted that the whole of his equipment should become the property of the young nobleman, and that he should have his in return. He would take no denial, and the matter was settled almost by force.

Such strenuous days brought nights of dreams, when Francis saw himself a leader of men, first in combat, the favourite of princes, successful in all he undertook. But on the night of his generous adven-

ture with the poor nobleman he had another dream of singular vividness. He thought he was led by an unknown guide into a fine palace, the walls of which were hung with glittering weapons and harness of war. Upon a dais sat the fairest of maidens, veiled and dressed as a bride.

"To whom does all this belong?" he asked, and a voice replied, "To you and to your soldiers of war."

Surely such a dream was a portent of a successful future!

Full of joyful excitement and anticipation, Francis rose next morning, bade farewell to his parents and friends, and rode off on his fine horse to join his leader in Apulia. Gayest of that gay band, he advanced across the plain till they reached Spoleto, the town that stands upon the old Flaminian road that leads to Rome. There they stayed for the night; and in that spot was raised for Francis a strange, invisible, yet impassable barrier to all his worldly hopes and ambitions.

He had ridden fast and recklessly under the hot noonday sun, in a state of excitement that was bound to meet with reaction of some sort. It came in the shape of a touch of malaria, common in that district, which stretched him in discomfort on his bed.

As he lay there in a restless doze that was far from actual slumber it seemed as though an imperative voice began to question him.

"Where goest thou, Francis?"

"Into Apulia, to gain my knighthood," was the wondering reply.

"Then tell me, Francis, whom it is better to serve, the lord or the servant?"

"The lord, most surely."

"Then why dost thou make the servant thy lord?"

The poignant question pierced his heart, and the young adventurer leaped from the bed, and kneeling by the open window cried with outstretched arms:

"Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?"

"Return," said the voice, "to the land of thy birth, and it will be told thee there what thou must do. For it may be that thou shalt find another meaning for thy dream."

For the rest of that night Francis tossed sleepless upon his bed; and at dawn, apparently without a word of explanation to his companions, he rose and saddled his horse, and rode back to Assisi.

There are some who are of opinion that other and less supernatural causes led the young man to return to his father's house. These suggest that he quarrelled with his fellows, that he was even ill-treated and bullied by those who were jealous of his full purse. Surely such interpretation accords ill with what we know already of his fearless nature, his power of swaying his companions, his faculty for seeing the best side of everything. Far more likely is it that he had long been conscious of a hidden call, of an inward conviction that the life of worldly ambition was not for him: that he had striven to stifle it under the excitement of his preparations for departure, and that in the extraordinarily clear sight that a touch of fever sometimes affords he had seen the impossibility of altogether disregarding the voice that some men call vocation, instinct, conscience, or what they will, and others the Voice of God.

So he returned to Assisi, to face the surprise, the curiosity, possibly the contempt of the inhabitants. But of these he took small heed. Outwardly he went back to his old life, in the shop, at the feast, and at the revels was as usual the leader of all the rest. But those who knew him best marked in him an extraordinary change. His wild, uneven spirits had given place to serenity and inward joy; he seemed to be wrapt in thoughts that were full of interest and sweetness; his very fits of abstraction left him smiling. But sometimes when he, holding his white wand, led the riotous band of youngsters in merry procession through the city streets, his glance would rest long and seriously upon the troop of hungry and filthy beggars who pressed round to see the fine young gentlemen pass by, and he seemed to question with himself concerning these when he should have been leading the song or jest. Sometimes, indeed, he would fall quite suddenly after such encounters into a mood of absolute silence that baffled and vexed his gay companions.

"Surely you must be in love, Francis!" they cried. "Is it, then, the charms of your future bride upon which you are always musing?"

Instead of the gay disclaimer they expected came a reply of unwonted seriousness. "You are right. I am in truth thinking to take a wife, more rich and noble and beautiful than any maiden you have seen."

They laughed and muttered coarse jests; but dared not refer again to the matter.

There came a summer night in that year 1205 when Francis had given a feast more than usually

lavish and extravagant. He was, as usual, the king of the table; and when the banquet was over his guests vied with each other in their praise of his bounty. He cut them short, and they all set out on the customary procession through the streets and alleys, singing and playing as they went. Presently, however, Francis lagged behind until he found himself alone in one of the winding narrow lanes opening upon a little 'place' such as is still to be seen in Assisi.

And there once more the call sounded in his listening ears, striking him dumb and motionless as he knelt there, yet filling his soul with indescribable sweetness and delight. How long this lasted he knew not, but presently came another phase; he saw his past life stretch behind him full of vanity, selfishness, want of discipline and self-control; and in front of him another life, not that of prince or soldier, but one of hardship, loneliness, self-renunciation.

From this time he began little by little to withdraw himself from the companions of his former life, and to seek opportunities for solitude and prayer. He would not have them guess why he so often slipped away to some hidden spot outside the city walls; among them all there was but one he could trust with his secret, and him not altogether. But his was no austere hermit soul; he needed a confidant, and it was to that young man, whose name is unknown to history, that he told something of his inner life in enigmatic form. He would take him to one of the ancient Etruscan tombs or grottoes on the hillside, and leaving him to bask in the sun outside

would enter and pray, often aloud, often crying out in seeming joy or entreaty. His friend made curious inquiries, and was told something of a great treasure which he had in this grotto, and that he was trying to find some means of extracting it from the ground in which it lay hidden.

Sometimes he would emerge from this dark oratory of the soul with face drawn and haggard, and would speak wildly of horrible dreads that had fallen upon him, the dread especially of disease and distortion of body.

"You see too much of these lepers," his friend would suggest.

"I shall see more of them anon," Francis might have replied, as he pressed his hands over agonized eyes as though to shut out a hideous sight. He had all his life worshipped beauty, and shrunk from the ugliness of life; it was not without sore struggle that he faced a future that would bring him face to face with the horrors that haunted his vision.

He had yet to make the supreme act of renunciation; but all through this strange period of conflict, loneliness, and fear his doubts grew less and less; his future more clear.

He must give up all; he must go forth upon a way of sorrows, hard and rough to the feet, yet filled with a mysterious sense of joy that far excelled the wild happiness of those youthful years in Assisi.

Meantime he must be content to wait upon the will of his new Master.

CHAPTER IV: *The Renunciation of Francis (April 1207)*

The privilege of Poverty, whom he was wont to name his Lady.
ST BONAVENTURA, *Life of St Francis*

MONTHS had elapsed since Francis had returned to Assisi in response to the call within his soul, and as yet he seemed to have advanced scarcely at all toward its fulfilment.

His father probably saw no difference in his son; his mother noted the long hours spent in solitude in the grotto outside the city, where he was learning to become a man of prayer. But what struck her most was his strange preoccupation with the poor and outcast beggars, to whom he had formerly thrown a hasty alms and as quickly forgotten.

One day she found that he had given his fine cloak and tunic, even his shirt, to a ragged mendicant who seemed to have no special claim upon the merchant's son. Another day, when she entered the room for the evening meal, she found the table laid out with bread and meat to an extent that her little family would have found overwhelming. His younger brother and sisters laughed and teased him for his whim. His mother asked if he expected guests. "Yes," said Francis, pointing through the open doorway to the crowd of beggars on the steps of the neighbouring church. "The hungry are my guests."

"But why not give them alms instead?"

"Nay," laughed the young man shyly, "surely 'tis more neighbourly to feed one's guest from one's own table!"

This was not enough, however. So far he had only

watched from a distance, with a kind of fearful curiosity, the poor whom he had formerly shunned. Now there came to him a strong desire to put himself in their place, to find out exactly how poverty and hunger and dirt affected the individual soul.

This could not be done in Assisi, where Francis was as sensitive as ever to public opinion. The departure of his father, however, on one of his lengthy journeys removed an obstacle to an attempt elsewhere. Just at that time a pilgrimage was being made by some of the people of Assisi to the Holy City ; among them was the Bishop himself, who took a lively interest in the young son of Bernadone. Francis would have preferred fewer spectators, but in Rome he might well hope to lose his identity better than at Assisi, and he joined the pilgrimage, therefore, with some vague idea of making his experiment when opportunity afforded. It came, perhaps, sooner than he expected.

It was the custom for pilgrims to throw their offerings for the upkeep of the church of St Peter's at Rome through the grating above the tomb of the apostles ; and as young Francis watched well-to-do people fling their trifling coins through the bars at no cost to themselves, his soul was filled with disgust. Taking a double handful of coin from his purse, he threw the money in with a clatter and jingle that attracted every one's attention. For one moment he was the ostentatious youth of former days ; the next his soul revolted at his own act. This was not generosity : it had cost him nothing at all. Stumbling out of the church in the dim light, he saw just at the entrance a filthy hand outstretched. Beckoning to the beggar to whom it belonged, he led him to an

adjacent alley, changed clothes with him, sent him off to spend an extravagant alms, and took his place on the steps of the church. There he remained all day, asking for alms in French—a characteristic touch, seeing that it was his favourite language—the tongue of his gay youth, and yet sufficiently unfamiliar to convey the sense of masquerade that he was still boy enough to enjoy.

"Whenever he talked French," says one of his biographers,[1] "those who knew him were sure that he was happy."

The incident, odd and freakish as it seems, marked another milestone on the road he was travelling. When he returned to Assisi, his parents noted with growing uneasiness that his visit to Rome, about which he was so strangely silent, had made him more absentminded, more solitary, than before. No doubt Bernadone began to grow restive, and to question when this favourite son of his was going to settle down in earnest and help him with the business. His former companions looked askance at him who no longer joined their revels; the popular hero of Assisi, though he knew it not nor troubled himself any whit about the matter, was tottering on his pedestal.

Not even his mother guessed that he, the lifelong lover of romance, had taken service beneath the banner of a Crucified Lord, and was more absorbed in devotion to His Person than was ever squire to knight in those days of chivalry. It was no ordinary conversion; he seems to have had very little thought or care for his own spiritual condition, but rather to have been possessed by a passion of love and admira-

[1] Jörgensen.

tion for his new Master, and an intense craving to follow in His steps. His whole attitude was strongly characteristic of those days, when faith was either a vain, shadowy thing or, as in this case, a fire of personal devotion and generosity that burned for self-sacrifice at any cost if only it might bring the lover nearer the object of his passionate affection. But as yet Francis was no saint, but only a very human and imperfect young man of twenty-five years old; and as he set out upon the path that led to the mountain-top thick mists came down and hid the Vision from his longing eyes.

If he would follow the Master he must, like Him, become the friend of the poor, the afflicted, and diseased; but Francis loathed the sight of dirt and distortion, and had been wont to turn sick with disgust when the wind carried to his delicate nostrils the stench from the lazar-hospital outside the walls of Assisi.

These institutions, common enough in medieval towns, were abodes of horror, where lepers were allowed shelter, and those most grievously afflicted were given some rough kind of tending at the hands of the members of the Order of St Lazarus—a special order of chivalry. But the wretched inmates were dependent upon charitable alms for food and clothes, which most of those who could walk sought by begging outside the lazar-house, in spite of the severe laws which forbade their intercourse with the outside world. So that, however Francis might strive to avoid the neighbourhood of the loathsome hospital, he could never be sure that he would not meet one of its unhappy inmates wherever he went; and knowing

this he was ever on the alert to escape from the very sight of the wretched people, whom he pitied but looked upon with all the abhorrence that disease and ugliness presented to a delicate and fastidious mind. Yet he could not but remember the frequent intercourse held of old between his new Lord and the outcast lepers, and the remembrance weighed heavy upon his soul. Other matters troubled him also. Love of a singularly happy and caressing home, fondness for nice food, for fine clothes, for soft living, for beautiful surroundings, was still strong in Francis; and so far he seems to have received no inward spur to renunciation, no supernatural wave of fervour to carry him beyond the ties of the world. But one day, when he was riding from the plain up the steep mountain-road to the city, the veils of mist that were pressing close around him passed away in one act of self-surrender.

A leper unexpectedly sprang up in his pathway, asking for alms. The horse swerved, and Francis was on the point of spurring him along a bypath, in order to avoid closer contact, while flinging a coin behind him to the man, when suddenly "a great wave of pity swept over him," and dismounting he took money from his purse and placed it with courteous greeting in the leper's hand. And then, as his fastidiousness fell from him like a cloak, he embraced the unhappy sufferer in his arms.

"All that was once hateful to you shall become full of joy and sweetness." So rang words in his ears, words that had been but dimly comprehended before; but now he experienced their meaning to the full. From that moment the victory over him-

self was nearly complete; he had but one more brief period of training before he could become a fully equipped soldier of his Lord.

His daily visits to the lazar-house excited the comment of Assisi: was this the fastidious young merchant who had been wont to hold his delicate nostrils as he passed the building? No doubt his former companions still teased him with coarse allusions to the bride he had once mentioned. Was she then to be found among the lepers?

They spoke more truly than they knew, for the bride upon whom Francis was to set his affections, the Lady Poverty of his choice, was indeed to be found among the poor and suffering folk of this earth. And as he tells us himself: "When I left them [the lepers] all that had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul."

It is remarkable, especially in an age which regarded a grim and severe asceticism as a mark of inward holiness, that Francis dwells upon this "sweetness of soul," this joy, not only in spiritual things, but also in the ordinary everyday matters of this world. It was a joy that transformed the earth into a fairyland of beauty and happiness, and which was to increase in him more and more until the day of his death. He had no desire to become a hermit, a monk, or even a priest, in order that he might leave the world behind. The whole earth was still for him, as it had been in former days, the "scene and circumstance of high chivalry," but transformed by his own new ideal of life in the service of his Lord.

He had still, however, a painful initiation before

he was made a freeman of his new kingdom. So far he had waited for the definite call to action—waited, no doubt, with the impatience natural to his ardent, sensitive nature. Now, on a sudden, the time seemed to have come to take action.

Outside the city of Assisi, on the hillside beyond the town, stood the little ruined church of San Damiano, empty save for a great crucifix suspended over the bare altar.

Before this cross Francis had many a time prayed for light to see and power to do the will of his Master ; and at length one day as he knelt there, absorbed in love and reverence, it seemed as though a voice spoke from the rood : " Go, Francis, and repair My church, for, as thou seest, it is wholly in ruins."

At first he was filled with dismay at the thought of such a task, but realizing that here perhaps was the test, the answer to his prayer, though in the most unexpected form, he murmured, " Gladly, Lord, will I do what thou desirest."

Quickly he left the church, and finding outside the priest of the place, a poor old padre, sitting on a bench in the sunshine, he emptied his purse into the old man's lap and said, " I pray thee, father, to buy oil and keep a lamp always burning before the Crucified."

It was the outward symbol of his acceptance of the Master's service.

Hastening home in his usual impetuous way, full of plans for carrying out his design, he went to his father's shop, made a large selection of cloths from the stock, and strapping them on the back of his horse rode off to the cloth-market at Foligno.

Francis at San Damiano

He said nothing to his parents, for his father was absent on one of his long journeys, and Francis probably felt that his mother would agree that as his father's partner he had a right to his share of the property.

At Foligno he sold both goods and horse, and hastening back on foot made his way up to the ruined church, where perhaps the priest still sat half asleep in the sunshine. Awakened by the hurried footsteps, the old man would see before him the young man, in his fine, dusty clothes, and breathless with haste, bowing low before him and offering him a large bag of money.

For a moment he must have seemed like a young archangel straight from heaven; but recognition of the wild young son of Bernadone brought hesitation and suspicion. He would not accept so large a sum from such a source, lest trouble ensue. In vain Francis, sitting by his side, argued and persuaded, urging that the money should be used for the restoration of the church, and that all he asked in return was permission to come and live with the priest, since he could no longer bear to resume his former life at home.

But the wise old man was unmoved; the youth might come and live at San Damiano if he would, but so large a sum of money could not be accepted from one whose reputation for odd pranks was so well known. Losing his temper, Francis flung the bag of money among the *débris* of a crumbling window-sill within the church; then came a quick repentance, and he begged, at any rate, to be allowed to remain at San Damiano.

By this he gained but a few days of peace, for meantime Pietro Bernadone had returned, probably with a firm determination to put a stop to the whims and fancies of his son, and so to fill his time with hard work that he would have no energy for anything but the life of a merchant and salesman.

He was met at the threshold of the town with a fine tale of the latest vagaries of his son. His assistants, that it might lose none of its effect, pointed to the bare shelves, the empty stable; his wife, shocked and distressed, had no word of excuse for the boy who had deserted his home in such strange fashion. The anger of Bernadone waxed all the hotter for the remembrance of his former indulgence. Francis should be brought to his senses, and that soon. With a party of indignant acquaintances he set off for the church of San Damiano, where Francis had last been seen, intending to bring him back by force. But the youth, his fear of parental violence stronger as yet than his sense of right-doing, had fled to a cave on the hillside, a favourite and secret resort for some time past, and lay there securely hidden.

Here he lay for a month of mingled bitterness and sweetness; for though he spent much time in intimate communion with his Master, he was yet full of dread of the consequences of his adhesion.

His father, fond as he had been, had yet in him the makings of a tyrant; he possessed almost absolute power over the body of even a grown-up son; more than that, the young man's sensitive, affectionate nature shrank intensely from misunderstanding, from rebuke, most of all from ridicule.

There were dark days to be lived through in his mountain grotto, where his solitude was only broken by the visits of the one friend who knew his hiding-place, who brought him food in secret from his mother's hands.

At the month's end the lad was as changed in mind as in body. Shame had overtaken him for his cowardice, the bitter shame of him who shrinks from combat for fear of what hurt may befall.

Thin and haggard, pale of face and subdued of mien, he left his lurking-place and appeared one spring day in the streets of his native town. At first people merely stared as though they saw a ghost; then they began to jeer at this sorry figure slinking along in the shadow; finally, grown bolder, they took up mud and stones and flung them at the shrinking youth, as was their custom when an imbecile or madman appeared in their streets. From his shop Pietro heard the din, which seemed to centre round his house, and sent out an apprentice to learn the cause.

"'Tis but a fool at whom they are jesting," reported the lad; but Bernadone pushed his way to the door and saw in the midst of the crowd of scoffing spectators the soiled and sorry form of his own son.

"Look, Messer Pietro," cried the crowd, "here is come back your fine young knight—he who was to be a prince among men! What a conqueror is he! He has brought such a rich bride, and half a kingdom at his back!"

Beside himself with rage and mortification, Bernadone rushed from the house, dealing blows right and left, and seizing the slight form of Francis in his

arms carried him, as if he were a child again, with many an oath of fury, to a dark room with windows barred, at the top of the house. There, snatching a stick, he flogged the lad till his arm was weary, and, leaving him prostrate on the floor, locked the door upon him and left him to himself.

Such treatment of a grown-up son seems incredible in these days, but the parental authority of the Middle Ages was no mere figure of speech. Francis, moreover, was very young for his age ; and his wild pranks and absurd poses must have hindered any sentiment of respect for his growing manhood. But most of all Bernadone's conduct can be best accounted for by his real though selfish affection for his son, which filled him with dismay at sight of his misery, and with unreasoning anger at his having brought it on himself. Not the loss of a bag of gold, but a rush of thwarted affection and ambition made the father the instrument of God's shaping of His servant's fate.

He was just then on the point of setting out on one of his journeys, and to prevent further trouble he fastened manacles upon the hands and feet of Francis, locked fast door and window, and departed.

If the young man himself seemed strangely at peace under all this harshness, it was quite otherwise with his mother. Donna Pica must have been torn between loyalty to her husband and pity for her son. After all, it was but a Christian deed to rebuild a church, to be kind to the poor and outcast. Wrong it was to take his father's goods without leave, but then had not Francis always been free to do as he would without comment or restriction ? He must, of

course, give up his wild ideas of leaving home and living in solitude, then all would be well, and his father would, on his return, give him the kiss of peace.

So she went, motherlike, to scold and pet and plead with the culprit in his bonds. But to her surprise she found him no longer a yielding boy, prepared to give up all for the sake of being restored to favour. He told her, very gently and simply, of his call to leave home and go forth to work among the poor and the diseased, to give up ease and luxury, and live the life of the Crucified. No mother-heart could fail to understand ; and with her own hands Donna Pica unloosed his chains and bade him go forth to fulfil his mission. So Francis returned to San Damiano.

Not many days elapsed before Pietro Bernadone returned home to find his son gone. He had come back prepared to forgive a penitent after due reparation had been made. This apparent defiance turned his affection to intense bitterness, and he went forth cursing from the city to bring back Francis by force, or to drive him out for ever from his sight. But no force was needed. Calm and confident the young man came forth to meet him, and to take with meekness and courage the blows and ill words that fell thick upon him. But he would not return to his former life.

" Go, then, ungrateful wretch," cried the father, " but first restore every penny of the money of which you have robbed me, and renounce all rights that belong to you as my son."

" The last, yes ! But the money was given for the rebuilding of a church and the relief of the poor, and is mine no longer to restore to you."

Beyond this he would not go. He may have been wrong in taking the goods without the permission of his father, but the matter was no longer in his hands. Bernadone was more infuriated than ever, and returning hot-foot to the city hastened to the town hall, where the consuls who ruled in civic affairs were in session, and then and there demanded that his money should be restored and his undutiful son disinherited in favour of one of his younger children.

Knowing Francis so well, and much concerned about this catastrophe, the city fathers sent a herald to bid the culprit appear before their court. This, however, met with something like defiance, for Francis sent back word that, having now taken service as a 'cleric,' he was no longer under the jurisdiction of the consuls, but under that of the Church.

It was the same point as was raised between the English King Henry II and Archbishop Becket; and on this occasion the lay rulers were only too glad to leave the painful matter in the hands of the Church. The Bishop at once took it up, and on a certain day father and son appeared before him. No doubt he knew all that lay behind; no doubt his sympathies were all with the lad whose confidant he had been; but he would leave the harsh father no claim for injustice, though his words must have planted a thorn in the merchant's worldly heart.

"If it is your intention to consecrate yourself to God's service," said he to Francis, "you must first restore to your father his mammon; for since it may have been acquired unfairly, it should not be used for the profit of the Church."

A strange scene followed this judgment. At the

Francis Before the Bishop

right hand of the Bishop sat Bernadone in his scarlet robe, on the left the slight figure of Francis in clothes that had once been the bravest in Assisi. When the Bishop had spoken the young man sprang to his feet, and, gazing at his father with kindling eyes, cried out, " My lord Bishop, very willingly do I return to my father not only the money I had from him, but even my clothes, which are also his property."

A few swift movements, and the slight young body was bare, save for a hair shirt ; while his clothes and the bag of gold lay at Bernadone's feet. Then, as all the court stood amazed, he turned to them and cried in his clear voice :

" Hear, all of you ! Until now I have called Pietro Bernadone my father, but now that I have taken service with Another I restore to him the money about which he has been troubled, and all the clothes that I took of him also ; for in future I will not say ' My father, Pietro Bernadone,' but ' *Our Father Who art in heaven.*' "

White with emotion, the old merchant stooped, gathered up money and clothes, and walked with set face and angry eyes from the court ; while amid the mutterings of the spectators the Bishop turned to the naked Francis, wrapped him in a fold of his great mantle, and pressed this young servant of the Church to his heart.

Soon a labourer's tunic was found for him, and dressed in this he was allowed to slip quietly from the court.

Such was the first great renunciation of St Francis —the theme of poets and artists and preachers ever since.

To our modern minds it suggests thoughts not altogether in sympathy with medieval ideals. We cannot but feel that that dramatic moment was quite consistent with the love of acting which had already distinguished Francis ; nor can we wholly condemn, as the onlookers seem to have done, the parent who had once shown himself the most indulgent of fathers, and whose real emotion now was neither anger nor cupidity, but shamed and baffled affection for the boy on whom all his hopes had been built.

Two points must, however, be remembered. It was no momentary triumph, no empty display, for Francis. He was but at the beginning of his training as a saint, or he might have made his renunciation more humbly and more considerately ; but it was real renunciation all the same. It faced a definite loss of all that had made life sweet and pleasant from his former point of view, and, what was very much harder, a severe struggle against his own temperament and inclinations. Outcast and penniless, with no prospect of even a religious ' career ' in front of him, there could have been no material satisfaction in the knowledge that he had come off best from the conflict with his father, but only a most natural heart-sinking when he realized all that it involved.

Bernadone, on the other hand, for whose shamed figure one can but feel compassion, had been purely selfish in his affection for his son. He was ready to pour gifts upon him, to bring him up in extravagant ways, just as long as his brilliant boy was likely to do him credit. But to the call to higher things he was altogether deaf : he made no attempt to understand the young man's point of view : he made every

allowance for what to him may well have seemed the whims and fancies of an emotional temperament when the latter expressed itself in worldly follies, and none at all when it turned to religion as its vent. This, then, is the justification of Francis in leaving his father's house. He could never have fought the battles of his new Master as the son of Bernadone; and because of this he was right in following literally the intimation made by his Master long ago: "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple."

CHAPTER V: *The Troubadour of God*

He triumphed in all the works of the Lord's hands, and through the sight of their joy was uplifted unto their life-giving cause and origin.

ST BONAVENTURA, *Life of St Francis*

IT was on a morning of April, one of the fairest seasons in Umbria, that Francis went forth into the world, almost as naked and poor as on the day he first came into it. He did not at once go back to San Damiano, but turned his face toward the path that leads up Monte Subasio, and climbed with swift and eager steps until he found himself far from human habitation on the summit of the mountain. Thence he could see what looked like the whole world at his feet—the vast plain, the valley of Spoleto, the blue distance of the Apennines; and this place he chose to stay in for a while to rest his tired soul, to find himself anew.

It was here, probably, that in the midst of intense loneliness, bereft of parents, friends, acquaintances, an outcast from his native place, and entirely without ties in the future, that Francis began to realize something of that close companionship and friendliness of nature which was to remain with him till his life's end. To Mother Earth he had long been no stranger, but here was new kinship claiming him on every side. The wolf that slunk in the thicket yonder became his brother; the water that trickled down the hillside was his sister; the sun that warmed him in the noontide and the moon that turned his night to day were his kinsmen; and the myriads of birds that sang above

his head chanted matins with him as one of the family of God. An intense feeling of happiness took possession of his heart, a joy that he was never entirely to lose again ; and it was in the spirit of a slave who has suddenly been given his freedom that he at length descended the mountainside and made his way toward Gubbio. As he walked he sang aloud in French some of the happiness that filled his soul ; for his was now more than ever the spirit of the troubadour, ready to sing the praises of his Lord and of his new Lady, the Lady Poverty. But the road to Gubbio was wild and unfrequented, and as Francis ran singing on his way a troop of brigands rushed upon him from a wayside thicket and demanded an account of himself.

" I am the herald of the Great King ! " was the ready and fearless reply. Astounded at the apparition of a herald dressed in a labourer's tunic with a rough cross chalked on its back, the brigands' first thought him mad, and with the usual medieval contempt for the afflicted they took him roughly by arms and legs, tore off his tunic, and flung him into a hole still filled with the snows of winter. " Lie there, thou foolish herald ! " they cried, and left him alone. But even the snow, though chill company, had now become one of his kinsfolk, and presently he emerged not much the worse, though nearly naked, and ran laughing from her embrace. It was but one of the many adventures that must befall the " troubadour of God," and he went on his way singing louder than ever, till he reached a monastery, where he hoped for clothes and food.

Strange to say, the monastery gave no welcome to the young man ; he was, it is true, allowed to earn

some food by working as a scullion in the kitchen, but no cloak was given him, and after a few days he left its inhospitable walls. But in Gubbio he had a friend, possibly him who had been so closely in his confidence in those strenuous days before his call, and this friend gladly gave him a hermit's dress, a tunic with leather girdle, shoes, and staff. For a while he stayed at Gubbio, working among the lepers with tireless zeal ; but the call still rang in his ears, " Go, Francis, repair My church, which is in ruins," and soon he returned to San Damiano.

He seems at first to have taken the command quite literally, and only after he had literally fulfilled it to have realized its wider and more symbolic meaning. San Damiano still lay in ruins, and he must repair it. It was no easy task, and nothing could have been a better test of the sincerity and perseverance of the young man. The old priest had heard too much of the strange scene in Assisi to welcome him very heartily ; he feared public opinion, and it took all Francis' persuasion, backed by the Bishop's opinion, to get him to receive him. Moreover, Francis was, of course, quite penniless ; how could he possibly obtain the necessary materials for rebuilding ? But the young man was indomitable. " I will go up to Assisi as a troubadour," said he gleefully, " and sing for what I want. Be sure, father, that I shall not return empty-handed."

To the medieval mind, moved so easily by song as well as by any kind of fantastic action, the spectacle of Francis in hermit's garb, singing gaily as he approached the city that had cast him out, was full of interest and attraction. They thronged round him

as he leapt upon a big stone singing, laughing, jesting in minstrel fashion. Was this the latest craze of this mad son of Bernadone? But hearken, now he has finished his song and begins to beg in a strange chant, a parody of the mendicant's whine:

"He who will give me one stone shall receive one reward in heaven; he who will give me two stones shall receive two rewards; and he who will give three stones shall receive three."

He had won the day. The citizens laughed, and ran to fetch him what he asked for; some few, we are told, "were moved to tears to see that he had passed from such worldly vanity to such a degree of zeal for the love of God."[1]

Staggering under the load, Francis carried the stones one after another to San Damiano, and began to build, singing as he built; and if anyone lingered to watch him he would call out cheerily, "Come along and help me to build a church for good San Damiano."

Once only, and but for a moment, did his splendid courage fail him. He had gone up to Assisi to beg oil for the church lamp; but as he drew near the house whence he hoped to obtain it, he saw a band of his former intimates making merry round a table in the courtyard. Soiled and threadbare, his hands rough with toil, Francis shrank into the shadow of the wall and gazed in shame at the merry party at whose head he would once have been placed. He even turned back for a few steps, then suddenly remembering himself ran forward into their midst and began to beg "for oil for a coward who had turned his back in shame." They gave it, looking shyly upon

[1] Celano.

their former friend; and Francis, more than ever master of himself, returned to the church.

At San Damiano he had quickly won the affection of the old priest, who watched his ceaseless toil in wonder, and took pleasure in preparing him a comfortable meal when his day's work was over. For a time Francis accepted this with gratitude; but with the life of his Master ever before his eyes it could not be allowed to continue. "Brother Ass," as he had already begun to call his body, must not be pampered; to overcome his lifelong habits of daintiness stern means were necessary. Taking a bowl he would go up to the city and beg the scraps that the housewife of Assisi would have thrown to the dogs. At eventime the bowl was full of an unappetizing assortment which he at first regarded with real disgust. But when he forced himself to eat his soul was once more flooded with that strange inward joy that had come to him before: the fastidiousness of Francis fell from him like a cloak, and his evening meal became in very truth the symbol of his kinship with all that family of God who depend for their living upon the charity of others.

One there was, however, who watched his begging progress daily through the streets of Assisi with most bitter thoughts. "Because he loved his son much," is the comment of the old chronicler, "Bernadone was now ashamed of him, and did much grieve over him." Sometimes it was impossible to avoid a meeting in those narrow streets, and on those occasions the merchant would curse his son aloud. For a long time Francis bore this as best he might; but at length, wounded to the heart by such treatment, he

asked a beggar-man to accompany him, saying, "Come with me and I will give you a share of my alms. But when you shall hear my father curse me, I, on my part, will say, 'Bless me, my father,' and you shall make the sign of the Cross over me in my father's stead."

When Francis next encounters his father Pietro's curse is met with the sign of blessing, and the young man makes piteous appeal to his parent's heart that yet sounds like defiance. "Do you not believe that God can give me a father to bless me against your curses?"

But such sad scenes were rare. The sweet humility, the gay outlook, the happy toil of Francis began to win all hearts, and helpers were soon not lacking in his task of building. San Damiano was now finished, and he was busy rebuilding the ruin of Santa Maria degli Angeli—the Portiuncula—a chapel hidden in a dense wood—very poor, very humble, the resort only of the outcast, the beggar, the leper, or such souls as Francis who love to worship their God in a place close to nature. For here the birds were choristers, the wind the incense-bearer, the small furry things of the woodland the acolytes that waited upon the altar. Some said, indeed, that the voices of angels mingled with those of the birds and the breeze in the branches that shadowed the chapel of the wood; whether this was so or not, the solitary little house of God was to Francis one of the most beloved of all places on this earth. It was there that the clearer call came to him —the call to go forth and take up the work for which this time of probation had been preparing him.

Mass was said very occasionally in the lonely spot,

where, as often as not, the birds and beasts of the forest were the only worshippers; but one day, the Feast of St Matthias, at the end of February, Francis was present, and the priest began to read the Gospel for the day: "'Preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. . . . Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses . . . neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves. . . . And when ye come into an house, salute it. And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it. . . . Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.'"

Dimly through the unfamiliar Latin came the meaning to the mind of Francis, but it grew clearer every moment. Directly Mass was over he begged the priest to read it again to him, and explain what it meant. Then he hesitated no longer.

"This is what I have waited for," he cried, and only stayed to make himself a rough brown habit shaped like a cross, before he went forth, barefoot, with rope round his waist, to carry out literally the commands of his Master. Full of joy, full of love, he goes forth, gay as any troudabour of romance, upon the Great Quest. His lifework had begun.

CHAPTER VI: *Beginnings of the Brotherhood*

When numerous flocked
The tribe of lowly ones, that traced his steps.
DANTE, *Paradiso* (Cary's trans.)

THE message carried by Francis, the "Herald of God," to a wondering world was as simple as his own character. Appearing one day in the streets of Assisi, barefooted, clad in a brown robe with a cord round his waist, he greeted the citizens he met upon their business with the words: "Brother, the Lord give you His peace."

It was a strange message to bring to a city that was immersed in its own constant petty strife as much as Italy herself was absorbed in a greater struggle. The aim was the same, for while Pope strove with Emperor for lands and power, citizen fought with noble, class with class, for civic rights and equality.

Almost they might have laughed in the face of Francis, so lately one of themselves, had they not noted the change that had come over him with his different garb. He was still full of the old charm, the old vivacity and humour; but the change was unmistakable. "He looked," says his earliest biographer, "quite other from that he had been; as though gazing into heaven he scorned to look upon the earth." So Celano describes that air of extraordinary happiness that was to be henceforth the chief characteristic of the Saint.

He was to undergo the utmost suffering, he was to shed many tears, to be disappointed in some of his

dearest hopes, and yet he remains the happy " Messenger," the " Troubadour of God," throughout his life. And it was because he was so full of his " vision of beauty " and of the joy it brought to his soul that he was anxious and eager to share it with others. Not all men could do as he had done, embracing his " Lady Poverty " without delay or regret ; but all could share to some degree in her strange and unexpected bounties by striving after an ideal of peace in a world of war.

At first the message of Francis fell lightly on the ears of the citizens of Assisi; but during the two years that had elapsed since Francis had left his father's house a marked change had come over their attitude to him. They had watched him descend the hillside straining under a heavy load of stones, or busily building up his ruined chapels, always with a song on his lips and a gay word and smile for those who passed by. They had noted the good-humour with which he received his daily scraps of castaway food, his tenderness with the lepers, his love for his brothers, the poor. Some of them, moreover, may have stolen down to the edge of the wood, and peeping awestruck through the door of the little chapel of St Mary of the Angels have seen the son of Bernadone rapt in devotion, with the light of the vision of God upon his face.

Real holiness, especially when accompanied by austerity and extraordinary simplicity of soul, made a ready appeal to the medieval mind ; and the men of Assisi began to feel a growing interest, and presently a good deal of pride, in their former fellow-citizen. The Portiuncula, now his acknowledged

spiritual home, gathered round it associations of holiness that drew many to its doors, and a few to comprehend, and then to dream, and then to take action. And so we find the beginnings of the Brotherhood that was to grow in after years into that great Order known as the "Friars Minor," or "Little Brothers of St Francis."

First of those who came to enter into his "Knightly Order of Poverty" was the merchant Bernard da Quintavalle, no enthusiastic youth or dreaming visionary, but a hard-headed, practical man of affairs, distinguished by his cautious judgment, "one of the most noble, rich, and learned in the city."

Perhaps in former days he had been one of those who had shaken their grave heads in disapproval more than once over the mad pranks and wasteful ostentation of Bernadone's son; but now he was observed to be foremost among those who listened to the burning words of Brother Francis when the latter, bidden to preach in the church or market-place, opened his soul in speech. "His words were like fire," says Celano, "penetrating the heart." What did Messer Bernard see in this youthful preacher, with "eyes dark and clear, hair thick, eyebrows straight, a delicate nose, a voice soft, yet keen and fiery, with long-fingered hands, small feet, delicate skin, and little flesh?"[1] Something, it would seem, that stirred him to the depths, and forced him to consider that most difficult step for a man of middle age and set habits, the giving up of his present mode of life, and the facing of the world anew.

Still he hesitated and watched, while one like him-

[1] *Fioretti.*

self in age and staidness of character, Peter of Cattano, a learned doctor of law, moved in like manner by the words of the young solitary, came to Francis with great humility, and placed himself under his guidance. At first this meant no marked change in his daily life, and probably both Bernard and Peter were content for a time to listen and ponder before making any decision.

Bernard, indeed, that he might judge the better, would ask Francis often to his house, to see whether he was but another of those wandering preachers who appeared from time to time in Assisi, exhorting, condemning, but without a message that made any practical difference to the lives of his hearers. To Francis all those who needed him were brothers, irrespective of age or income; he visited Bernard with the same joyful simplicity with which he would have entered a lazar-house, and he gladly agreed to spend the night at his house. It was on this occasion that the eyes of Bernard were opened.

And then, says the *Fioretti*:

> Bernard resolved to make trial of his sanctity; wherefore he got a bed prepared for him in his own room, in which a lamp was always burning all night. Francis, in order to conceal his sanctity, immediately on entering the room threw himself on the bed and feigned sleep; and Bernard likewise resolved to lie down, and began to snore loudly, as if in very deep slumber. Thereupon Francis, believing that Bernard was really asleep, immediately rose from the bed and betook himself to prayer; and raising his eyes and his hands to Heaven with the greatest devotion and fervour he said, "My God! my God!" and nothing more. And this he said contemplating and admiring the excellence of the divine Majesty Which deigned to stoop down to a world that was perishing, and to provide a remedy for the salvation of his

soul, and through him—His poor little Francis—for the salvation of the souls of others.

Some men would have marvelled and misunderstood. Bernard, himself touched by the divine fire, recognized the mystic rapt in the Vision Beautiful, and said to himself, "Truly this man cometh of God."

Without waiting much longer he said one evening to Francis:

"What should a man best do if, having held for many years the property of his lord, he now had no wish to retain it any longer?"

"Surely," said Francis, "he should return it to his lord."

"Then," replied Bernard, "I wish for the love of God to dispose of all my worldly goods as it may seem best to you, and to leave the world and follow you wheresoever you go."

Then Francis answered, "Early to-morrow morning we will go to church and hear from the Book of the Gospels what the Lord means you to do."

On their way thither they called for Peter, and so came all three together to the church of St Nicholas, where the Gospels lay on an altar-table for the use of all who cared to read. But now did Francis reap the fruit of wasted school-hours, for he knew not where to find the counsel he sought. Neither Bernard nor Peter were learned in Church Latin; so they had recourse to a favourite medieval expedient. Kneeling before the altar, Francis prayed earnestly for light from the pages of the Holy Book.

Then, opening it at random, his eyes lit upon the passage "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that

thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me."

Then, opening it again, he read: "And commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse: But be shod with sandals; and not put on two coats."

A third time he looked and saw: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

"Brothers," cried Francis, "here is our Rule of Life—for us and for all who will join us. Let us go forth and fulfil what we have heard!"

So the newcomers went joyfully away to dispose of their property. Celano, in the *Fioretti*, tells the end of that day's business.

> Having read this, Bernard departed and sold all he had (for he was very rich), and with great joy he distributed everything to the sick, and to widows and orphans and prisoners—old monasteries, hospices, and pilgrims; and in all things Francis helped him faithfully and wisely. And one Silvester, seeing that Francis distributed, and caused to be distributed, so much money to the poor, being moved by avarice, said to Francis, "You did not pay me enough for those stones which you purchased from me for the repairs of the church; seeing now that you have money, therefore pay me."
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> Then Francis, astonished at his avarice, and as a true observer of the Holy Gospel not wishing to dispute with him, put his hands into the sack of Bernard and filled them with coins, which he placed in the sack of Silvester, saying that if he wished more, he would give him more.
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> Silvester, satisfied with this, departed and went home. But in the evening, reflecting on what he had done through the day, and blaming himself on account of his avarice, considering the fervour of Bernard and the sanctity of Francis

—on that night and the two following nights he had from God this vision: that from the mouth of Francis there issued a golden cross, the top of which touched Heaven, and the arms extended from the east to the west.

The result was that Silvester, who by some accounts was a priest, also became a humble follower of Francis in his Brotherhood.

Some days after Bernard and Peter came Brother Giles, sturdy son of a farmer, full of sagacity in judgment, and of a pungent wit in things worldly and in things divine. He, hearing the story of Bernard, set out from the fields where he was working to find Francis at the Portiuncula, and seeing the latter in the wood hard by ran to him, saying simply, " Brother, I want to be with you for the love of God."

" See what a good brother the Lord has sent us," cried Francis to Bernard as he led the newcomer to the rough hut where they abode. Then, when they had eaten together, he would bring Giles to Assisi to get his habit. They met on the way a beggarwoman who cried to them for alms, and Francis, having nought, passed on in silence. But Giles hung back, looking wistfully at her, half afraid to suggest, yet loth to pass her by. " Let us give the poor sister your cloak," cried Francis, seeing his hesitation, and the young man threw it over her shoulders and hastened on in great joy of spirit to receive the " livery of poverty."

Then others followed: Angelo, that most gentle knight, who took new service with great gladness under the banner of a new Lord; Morico, who was so expert in tending lepers, and had once been nursed

by Francis through a dangerous illness; Barbaro, who was to become a fellow-crusader of Francis in days to come; and others, among whom was John de Capella, "who loved novelties and his own will," and was to be the Judas of that little company.

Thus, within a few short months, Francis found himself leader of a small band of earnest men, all bound to poverty and bent on living the life of their Divine Master.

For a time they were content to visit their own town and the neighbouring villages, two or three together, and to exhort the inhabitants to reform their daily lives. At first they were heard with favour, for Francis was an excellent speaker, and a halo of interest and originality surrounded the little band. But presently came the reaction. Perhaps the citizens became uncomfortable at the sight of such zeal and sanctity of life; perhaps the call for reform became too personal. Then some one declared that it was absurd for men to give away all their goods and afterward to expect to be fed and maintained by their neighbours. Ill words were showered upon them; and often the coarsest scraps of food were denied to Francis when he came to beg for his brethren's meal. Even the Bishop sent for the young founder of this strange new order and pointed out the unpractical nature of a rule that forbade men to make any definite provision for their bodily needs.

But the answer of Francis gives the keynote to the secret of his future success as a reformer.

"My Lord," he said, "if we keep property we shall need arms to defend ourselves, and we shall be

continually involved in lawsuits and in feuds; this will oftentimes prevent us from loving God and our neighbour. Therefore do we desire to possess no temporal goods in this world."

In an age when Italy and Europe herself were torn with strife between Pope and Emperor, bishop and clergy, monk and layman, nobleman and commoner, citizen and citizen, the words of Francis struck at the very root of the cause. For it was, as we have seen, the desire for temporal power, for material rights, that was weakening the hold of the Church over her people, as well as acting as a constant irritant between the members of the community themselves.

This must always be remembered when one is tempted, like the Bishop of Assisi, to condemn Francis as an unpractical visionary, leading a life impossible to ordinary men. For violent diseases violent remedies are sometimes called for; and the one way to open men's eyes and touch men's hearts was to set up an ideal so apparently extravagant and extreme that they were constrained by sheer force of contrast to look to their own ways.

So Francis returned to the Portiuncula with Bishop Guido's blessing, if with no more material comfort, and the work went cheerily on. It was still training-time for most of them, and they spent their days in tending the sick, nursing lepers, working as ordinary labourers in the fields, and spending much of the night in prayer.

Sometimes they were sent out on missionary journeys in the district, and frequently they were met with the query: "To what order do you belong?" To this they replied that at present they

belonged to no order, but were " men of Assisi who were living a life of penance."

And though in one sense this was true, there was nothing penitential about their appearance ; for they sang, laughed, and praised God incessantly, being filled to the brim by the joyous spirit of their leader.

The time was fast approaching, however, when their influence was to be extended far more widely than at present, and the necessity for a bond of union such as a rule and an order began to make itself felt.

CHAPTER VII: *Development of the Order*

The lovers' titles—Poverty and Francis.
DANTE, *Paradiso* (Cary's trans.)

UNCONVENTIONAL as Francis had so far shown himself, he was yet eager to be bound, as the "Knight of Christ," by the rules of his new order of chivalry. When the members of his little band of followers seemed likely to increase with some rapidity he addressed them in these words:

"I perceive, brethren, that the Lord is minded of His mercy to increase our fellowship. Let us go, therefore, unto our Mother the Church, and notify unto the Pope that which our Lord has begun to work through us, that by his good pleasure and command we may carry on that we have begun."

So, in the sweet Italian spring-time, twelve of the brethren, clad in their rough brown habits, followed him to Rome, carrying with them the simple Rule of their Order, and asking the right to preach their message of peace to the world.

In the Holy City their strange garb and eager faces caused a moment's wonder. Who were these men and for what had they come? But enthusiasts in the garb of penitents were not uncommon in those streets, and as a rule were seldom heard of again; there was nothing to show the indifferent Romans that this little band was one that in days to come should effect one of the most striking moral revolutions that Europe has ever seen.

Within the Vatican the greatest of medieval Popes was musing at that hour on plans that were nothing

less than worldwide in scope. The long struggle between Pope and Emperor had turned of late years in favour of Innocent III, and most of the Christian kingdoms of Europe had acknowledged his temporal as well as spiritual supremacy. Never had Pope been so powerful, so universally consulted, so much lord of the world; and he was sufficiently great in himself to wield his growing power with wise beneficence.

Some, it is true, saw in him merely ambition, to which his skill in politics and statesmanship gave full scope; but to a few it was given to know the intensely religious inner life of the man, and to realize that his desire to purify the social life of the nations under his sway was to him the highest aim of his life. To such a one the state of the medieval Church must have been a constant source of bitter reflection: for the spirit of luxury and greed had infected the holy places of Europe, and the high ideal which Christianity had set forth in earlier days was now become all too often a mockery and a delusion.

Often Pope Innocent must have longed for a Peter the Hermit to preach a spiritual crusade, one who should go forth to all nations, setting before them new aspirations, high ideals, and showing them at the same time how these should be put into practice; a man unhampered by traditions, with keen human sympathy, who should overthrow the formalism that was stifling the life of the Church, and while remaining in every respect her faithful son should infuse her with fresh life and the joy of new vision.

Yet when there came before him the reformer in the humble garb of a penitent, who was to do all these things, the great Pope knew him not and would have passed him by.

Knowing nothing of the pomp of papal Courts, Francis had made his way directly to him as he paced his cloisters, and without introduction or explanation presented to him his Rule. But the Pope, seeing in him possibly another of the unbalanced and heretical zealots who were leading Europe astray by their misguided teaching in social as well as religious ideas, curtly dismissed him. Fortunately Francis, on leaving the Vatican, met his own bishop, Guido of Assisi, who introduced him to Cardinal John of Sabina, one of the few prelates of that day who were distinguished rather for their spiritual fervour than for worldly ambition. He, when he had understood, promised to befriend him, and before long Francis knelt once more in the presence of Innocent, now full of interest and glad to give attention to what this eager-eyed herald had to set forth.

We can picture the scene: the stern Pope with lines of thought, care, and decision marking his worn face; the haughty cardinals pressing round, and gazing with surprised disdain at the barefoot man, with sensitive mouth, gentle voice, and the wonderful eyes of the enthusiast, who pleaded his cause in such burning words. Why not join an order already established? Why not live the life of a hermit if he felt that the world was so completely out of joint? Such were the questions they urged upon him; and he replied with all gentleness that for him the call of God was not to these; for him and his followers there was

but one life, the life of the Gospel to which he was sent to recall the world.

The great Pope heard with sympathy and understanding ; but one detail staggered both him and his cardinals. They could not accept as a practical possibility his purpose of living in absolute poverty, " without any provision for the morrow, save his trust in God's providence and the charity of man." They had none of the modern ideas of the immorality of mendicancy, and the need of a minimum income for every man ; but even to the medieval mind such an ideal seemed an impossibility to fulfil. One man only, the Cardinal John of St Paul, saw in this one detail the keystone to the whole edifice, and hotly pleaded the cause of Francis. For he realized that in this way only should true freedom of soul be obtained in a Christendom given over to love of wealth and worldly gain.

" If we reject the petition of this poor man," he urged, " as something novel and too hard to fulfil, when all he asks is that the law of life of the Gospel be confirmed in him, let us beware lest we offend against the Gospel of Christ."

" Go, my son," said Pope Innocent to Francis at length, " go, and pray to Jesus Christ that He may show us His will ; and when we know it more certainly, we shall the more safely sanction your purpose."

The mind of the medieval troubadour was wont to see all things in heaven and earth in the form of song and story and picture ; and Francis, " Troubadour of God," was no exception to the rule. As his more timid brethren knelt around him, fearing lest they

should be dismissed from the papal Court with their object unfulfilled, there came to Francis this parable: A certain woman, very poor but beautiful, dwelt in a desert. And there was a king who loved her because of her exceeding beauty. With joy he wedded her, and there were born to them most handsome sons. Now these sons grew up nurtured in all gentleness, and then their mother spoke to them, saying: "My dear sons, be not ashamed because you are poor, for you are all the sons of a great king. Gladly therefore go to his Court and ask of him whatever is necessary to you." They, hearing these words, marvelled and were glad, and being lifted up at this declaration of their royal lineage, and knowing themselves to be heirs to the king, esteemed their very need as riches. Boldly they presented themselves before the king, nor were they timid before the face of him whose likeness they bore. And the king, recognizing in them the likeness to himself, wonderingly inquired whose sons they might be. They told him they were the sons of the poor woman who dwelt in the desert. At that the king embraced them and said, "My sons and heirs you are; fear not. If strangers are fed at my table, by a greater right must I nourish them for whom all my possessions are lawfully kept."[1]

This was the story that Francis recounted to Pope Innocent when next he appeared before him, adding simply these words: "Holy Father, I am that poor woman whom God so loved and of His mercy hath so honoured."

The Pope heard in amazement, for to him the spirit

[1] The paraphrase is according to that in Father Cuthbert's *Life of St Francis.*

of the troubadour enlisted in the ranks of Christ was a new experience. Swift to see its power to purify and uplift a world sunk in materialism, he gazed with kindness and sympathy on the speaker, while there struggled to the surface of memory a former dream of whose significance he had often wondered. He had seen the church of St John Lateran in Rome about to fall, and only prevented from so doing by a man in hermit dress, poor and mean of stature, who set up his back against the tottering walls and so upheld it. Francis now became the man of his dream, and he neither dared nor wished to withhold his sanction and approval.

So Francis and his brethren left Rome as fully accredited " Preachers of Penance," that is, with the right not to expound doctrine, as did the regular preachers, but to exhort men to reformation of life. Henceforth, with their Rule approved, they went forth joyfully as *Fratres Minores* or " Friars Minor," the " Little Brothers of Francis and Holy Church."

Returning to Umbria, they spent two weeks in happy solitude among the caves of Orte—a spot so beloved by Francis that he was sorely tempted to remain there with his little band, that they might give themselves to a life of prayer and contemplation. But the call had been to knighthood, not to a hermitage ; and the " Knight of Christ " must pass along the highroad of the world in his quest for souls. So they went forth again, not to the narrow borders of the Portiuncula, but to a deserted shed at Rivo Torto, half-way between the latter spot and Assisi, and about half an hour's walk from either. Here, in quarters so small that Francis must needs mark with

chalk the place for each to rest, lest some should sleep outside to give more room to others, the brothers abode through that summer, autumn, and winter. Often they worked, helping the neighbouring farmers on the land; always they tended the lepers of the settlement close at hand; sometimes they looked starvation gaily in the face, and sustained life on mangels, shared with the beasts of the field. Once in a way they would come into close collision with the political events of the day, as when Otto IV ravaged Umbria in that year of grace 1210.

He had been crowned emperor by Pope Innocent in the previous year, when he had taken the oath of fidelity to the Holy See. But the old antagonism was still at work, and the States of the Church became his aim and prey. All that year his armies spoiled the hills and plains of Umbria, which Perugia did her best to defend; and in the autumn he made a triumphal procession to Rieti, passing by Assisi on his way. He had heard of the *Poverello*, the "Little Poor Man of Assisi," and would have turned out of his way to visit him at Rivo Torto; but Francis refused to receive him, sending instead one of the brethren with a solemn warning that his broken vow and shameless pillaging of the Papal States would bring swift retribution upon his head. Four years later the Emperor, excommunicated and deposed in favour of the little Frederick II, was to meet a bloody defeat upon the battlefield of Bouvines at the hands of Philip Augustus of France; and after another four years to die in want and misery.

Meanwhile, from time to time, Francis came forth from the obscurity of Rivo Torto to preach his

message to his native city. With absolute fearlessness he attacked the evils of his day—avarice, fraud, the luxury which grows out of the oppression of the poor, tyranny and injustice between man and man. The effect of his words was extraordinary, depending, as it clearly did, upon the personality of the speaker rather than upon his method of speech. He had, too, an intimate knowledge of the place; he knew the feuds of the citizens, the hatred between class and class, the constant factions; and ever his cry in the cathedral pulpit, where he now stood Sunday by Sunday, was "Peace and goodwill."

One result at least is worth noting. It was in the November of 1210, when the Emperor was battering at the gates of Umbria, that the citizens of Assisi met in council and signed a 'pact' or peace contract between the rich and poor of the city. Many excellent rules were contained in this document for the safeguarding of the weak and the restraint of the powerful; and when the "consent of the Commune" was accepted as the conviction of alliance with Pope or Emperor, city or town, peace reigned for the first time for many a year in contentious Assisi.

After these soul-stirring sermons Francis would return to an absolute simplicity of life with his Little Brothers at Rivo Torto, dwelling in close companionship with the world of nature, bird and beast and flower, and loving it the more as he saw how much nearer it was to his ideals than the world of men he had just left. Yet here too he had plenty of spiritual work to his hand, for he was training the souls and caring with almost a mother's tenderness for the bodies of his little community. In their enthusiasm

for poverty his followers would have been often near to starvation had it not been for his wise and kindly care.

But Rivo Torto was not to be their permanent abode. One day a peasant of rude and uncouth manners drove his ass into the crowded little shelter where the brethren were at prayer. "Get you out: here will we make a cosy dwelling," cried he, with many uncivil taunts meant for the ears of the disturbed occupants. Gentle as Francis was, he yet retained the quick temper and high spirit of his younger days. "Let us go forth and leave this fellow to his ass," he said. "God has not called us to prepare a stable for him, and to entertain him as he passes by, but to preach the way of salvation and to give ourselves to prayer."

He had long wished for the use of a chapel where they might pray in peace, and now of a sudden his desire was granted. When he approached the abbot of the great Benedictine monastery on Monte Subasio, asking for a refuge for his company, he was at once given the chapel of the Portiuncula, his first spiritual home. In the wood surrounding the little church they built rough huts of branches and turf; and to remind them that the land was not theirs by right of ownership they carried each year to the abbot of Monte Subasio a netful of fish and a measure of oil as rental.

CHAPTER VIII: *St Clare of Assisi*

> Such warning admonition
> Thou hast from Francis taken
> That purposest in hardness aye to dwell.
>
> JACOPONE DA TODI, *St Clare*
> (trans. by J. S. Roberts)

THE work of reformation and conversion set on foot by Francis would never, perhaps, have attained its fullness of success had it lacked entirely the feminine element; and this in a very interesting and natural manner was now about to be supplied.

And so it comes to pass that throughout the centuries that have elapsed since their own day the name of St Clare of Assisi stands side by side with that of her spiritual father, St Francis: and the "Order of Poor Clares" has never been far behind that of the Franciscans in setting before the world the ideal of joyful poverty and loving self-sacrifice.

On one of the steep sides of Monte Subasio stood Sasso Rosso—the Castle of the Red Rock—the feudal abode of Count Favorino, of the noble house of Scefi. The household was ruled by a gentle lady, Ortolana by name, who, in spite of the atmosphere of faction and fighting which permeated their medieval home, brought up her son and her four daughters in the fear of God and love of their fellow-men. One of her girls was specially notable for her interest in the poor at their gates. Before her birth, says the legend, a voice declared to her mother, Ortolana, as she prayed before her crucifix, that she should

have a child who should be a lamp to lighten the whole earth. So she called the babe Clare—the shining one—all the more readily that the child was born " with a smile on her lips." As she grew up the little girl rejoiced to gather about her the outcasts, the feeble, and the sick ; she held out her hand to alleviate their misery, and assisted them from her own abundance.

It was not long before the tale of her good deeds, performed for the pure love of God, spread from house to house, and whenever she moved through the city streets the people would respectfully salute her, murmuring in tones of admiration and affection, " 'Tis Clare, the beloved daughter of Count Scefi." [1]

She was a beautiful child, with long fair hair, finely cut features and perfect complexion ; and her father, in his ambition, was full of hopes and plans for a brilliant marriage, more brilliant even than that which her elder sister had already made with a noble gentleman of Assisi. That the marriage of such a sensitive and deeply religious soul with a worldly, possibly an unbelieving, husband might be nothing but a tragedy troubled him but little ; all he cared for was the acquisition of a wealthy and warlike son-in-law to carry on his feuds and to fight his quarrels.

Now one of those who frequented the house of Scefi was a youth named Rufino, who had for long haunted the footsteps of Brother Francis, and he, in the year 1210, when Clare was sixteen years of age, had, by his ardent wish, been admitted as a Friar Minor. Often he must have told the eager

[1] Celano.

girl of the teaching of Francis, of his wonderful personality, and the effect his words were making upon all those who knew him, " so that they received from his lips the Gospel as though they heard it for the first time."

Francis was just then preaching a course of Lenten sermons in the cathedral of Assisi, and these were regularly attended by Clare, her sister Agnes, and her mother. In the inspired friar in his rough brown habit the girl recognized a kindred soul, one also who would guide her into the fulfilment of a life of devotion to God and her neighbour. She had never felt the call, common enough to many girls, to retire to a convent for the sake of saving her own soul. But she longed with all her young heart to train her own spiritual life by solitude, prayer, and work, that she might be fitted to help a suffering world, not only by constant intercession, but by offering the sacrifice of her own worldly career in expiation for the ignorant and the evildoer.

The ideal is one that has largely passed away, and which to many modern thinkers is exaggerated and mistaken. But, apart from the fact that the idea of expiation by the innocent of the sins of the guilty is at least as old as Christianity itself, it must be realized that such a conception was essentially a part of medieval chivalry. That a knight should lay down his life for his lord was a commonplace of the chivalric ideal; so was the expiation of the crime of the father by the suffering of his innocent wife, or son, or daughter. And Clare, like Francis, was imbued by nature with the love of chivalry; no wonder then that she longed to give herself up to a

life of poverty and hardship in order to fulfil a part of its ideal.

Soon, under the charge of an aunt who lived near by, she came to know the preacher. He was but a deacon, and she came to him not as to a priest, but as to an adviser and inspiration. With his newly acquired prudence he made her wait two years before he would consent to her wish. But he had seen in her during all that while an elect soul, fit, in spite of her youth, to fulfil his high ideal.

Again, to some modern minds her method of obtaining her desire is reprehensible enough. Certain of her parents' refusal, she told no one but her aunt, who was in her full sympathy and confidence, and Francis, in permitting this secrecy, was but acting the part of the medieval knight, part of whose *devoir* is to rescue distressed damsels from the constraints of parental tyranny. With modern views of the rights and duties of parents such a course would be rightly blamed; but the matter must, in fairness, be judged by medieval and not by modern standards.

We see her then, on the Palm Sunday of 1212, a girl of eighteen, attending High Mass at the cathedral with her mother and sister, calm and collected outwardly, but inwardly moved with trepidation as she thought of what that day was to bring forth. We know even how she was clad—in a long, close-fitting tunic of scarlet cloth and headdress of white lawn, with a gold and jewelled girdle round her slim, girlish waist. Nervous and self-conscious, the girl kept her place when the rest of the congregation moved up to the altar-rails for the distribution of

the blessed palms. But the Bishop, knowing well by sight this lamb of his flock, and smiling perchance at her diffidence, himself came down the sanctuary steps and gave her the palm-branch. She took it with strange joy as the sign of acceptance with God; for she had prevailed upon Francis to receive her that very night as the first among the future handmaidens of the Lady Poverty.

Accompanied by a few trusty companions, and still clad in her Sunday bravery, she left her father's house, "going not by the usual door, but by another that was barred with beams and stones," and hastened to the chapel of the Portiuncula, where the brethren, keeping vigil at the altar, were waiting to receive her; and there, after she had received the habit of penance, she was led away, joyful at heart, to the church of St Paul, where the nuns received her into their charge "until another place should be provided."

Thither came next day her angry father and brother, commanding and entreating her to return; but Clare had taken her resolve once and for all. Again we find the medieval mind taking an altogether different view from the modern; and after the first storm of rage the parents accepted the fact with resignation, even with pride. Agnes, the younger child, was soon to follow her, and in later days both her mother and Beatrice, the youngest of all, were to share her cloister.

"O mother mine," Clare was wont to say if Ortolana in these early days reproached her for her desertion, "if I abandoned thee that I might embrace the religious life, I did so in order to unite myself to

Clare Escaping from Her Father's House

thee in a manner yet more intimate and more perfect. It shall yet be thy joy to die in the arms of thy daughter."

The real trouble must have been not her withdrawal from the world, but her choice of a strange and unknown Order. For a time she was sheltered by the nuns of St Angelo, about a mile outside the city; but after a year of probation here Francis obtained for her from the Benedictines of Monte Subasio the use of the little house and chapel of San Damiano, where he had made his first attempts at a new life. Here was she soon joined by other noble ladies of Assisi, fired by her example and that of Francis, her guide and inspiration.

Here they lived a life of absolute simplicity, working with their hands, cooking for the poor, mending the clothes of lepers, nursing the sick who came to their doors. They lived upon the vegetables grown in their tiny garden or upon the food begged for them by the brothers, and modelled their lives closely upon those of the latter.

"Not for Clare, indeed," says one of the most sympathetic of her biographers, "were the knightly excursions and adventures which sent Francis and his friars traversing the world to proclaim the gospel of poverty and to rescue souls from evil ways. She was the Lady of the House, conserving in her heart the true ideals which made these adventures spiritually glorious, and confirming with her sympathy and comfort the adventurers in the high path of honour in which they were called."

While content to be in every sense the handmaid of the brotherhood, and to speak of herself as the

" little plant " which Francis had grown in the garden of poverty, Clare was one whose strength of character was bound to be recognized by the world outside San Damiano. Many noble ladies, as we have said, from Assisi and still farther afield, inspired by what they heard of her life and ideals, came to the gates of the little convent and besought admission. Many more, bound by family ties to the world, were moved to order their lives and their homes upon lines as nearly approaching those of the cloister as was practical and possible. Of those who entered, one thing only was asked—that they should give all their goods to the poor, and so establish a method of life apostolic in its completeness.

Otherwise Francis gave them no rule—the liberty of soul that comes with absolute renunciation was their one reward. Those were not the days of active missionary work for women, and it was by their fervent prayers that they could best aid the brotherhood—by their prayers and by the high ideal of poverty that they kept before the eyes of a wondering world.

Trials were in store for them. Although in 1215 the sisterhood became a ' canonical,' or recognized religious community, with Clare as abbess, the authorities of those days were not inclined to favour new orders, as we have seen, and this was but the beginning of trouble. The two things Clare insisted upon were the rights of absolute poverty and of recognition as a part of the Franciscan Order ; and until the day before her death she was still fighting for these ends. In all things else she submitted, but when these two essential points seemed likely to be infringed, the Abbess Clare was ready to plead and

maintain her cause even to the very face of the sovereign pontiff of Rome.

When in later days Pope Gregory IX tried to persuade her to accept a small endowment for her community, which should secure them against actual want, and suggested that she should for this purpose accept a dispensation from her vow of poverty, she flashed forth with, " Holy Father, I shall never wish to be dispensed from following Jesus Christ."

Again, we find the same Pope striving to bring the Order into line with others by forbidding the Friars of St Francis to visit or preach to the sisters, excepting only those who went for the purpose of begging alms and food on their behalf. When she heard this Clare met the friars at the gate, and bade them return to their abode and say that since they might not visit the sisters to feed their souls in godly conversation and preaching, she would not have them beg food for their bodies. Her quick insight saw that such a regulation would end in making them a separate order, and that only in the spiritual union of friars and sisters would the ideal of the Franciscan family be maintained. The Pope saw it too, and rescinded his decision. Yet, in order that the Poor Clares might not come to depend too much upon the spiritual ministrations of himself and the friars, Francis himself did not hesitate to give them a gentle lesson in spiritual independence.

Clare, in her keen enjoyment of sermons, and especially those of St Francis, had prevailed at length upon him to come and preach at San Damiano. The sisters rejoiced " not only because they would hear the word of God," says Celano, " but because they

would see again their father and spiritual head." When Francis entered the church he stood for some moments with eyes upraised, rapt in prayer. Then, turning to the sister in charge of the sacristy, he asked for some ashes. With these he drew a circle round him and cast upon his head all that were left. Only then did he break the silence, and then not by a sermon but by the chanting of the fifty-first Psalm—the great hymn of penitence. Directly he had finished this he left the convent, having thus taught the sisters that there was nothing to be seen in him but a poor sinner in sackcloth and ashes.

Thus, in an atmosphere of renunciation that was yet full of the earnest spiritual joy and consolation, the Order grew and flourished. The long struggle for the maintenance of a very high ideal served only to purify and restrain, never to embitter or restrict loyalty and trust. The same Pope who had opposed the wishes of Clare loved and admired her " with a father's affection for a favourite daughter " ;[1] his successor would have made her a saint on the very day of her burial had he had his will.

So we leave her, for the present, cultivating in her little garden on the hillside those lilies of purity, roses of charity, and violets of humility that were her favourite flowers ; while the eyes of the citizens of the neighbouring cities turn toward her convent with love and affection, and women become more pure, and men more chaste and chivalrous, as they see her, " in an age that sang of chivalry, giving to the world a vision of pure women, strong in faith and fearless in loyalty."

[1] Father Cuthbert.

CHAPTER IX: *The Friends of Francis*

All fellow lives—at peace or daily wars
Sundered as island stars—
In his blind love's blue Heaven have lot and part,
All worlds find room in one unworldly heart.
A. S. C., *St Francis*

MEANTIME Francis, the inspiration of this last development of the Order, had not ceased for a moment his activity in other directions. During the year preceding Clare's reception he had, as the "Herald of Christ," carried his message beyond the confines of Umbria, founding colonies of the friars at Florence and Pisa. Thence the gospel of simplicity, love, and justice was preached, and many converts flocked to his banner.

Two incidents of this period illustrate especially well the spirit of the Franciscans and the ideal they raised before the world.

At Cortona, whither Francis betook himself after a period of strict seclusion upon a little island of Lake Trasimene, he had just finished one of his most burning, heartfelt appeals to the souls of his hearers, when a young man of singularly noble mien approached him and his companion, and, bowing low before him, begged him to accept hospitality at his house. This was gladly accepted, but when Francis found that the house in question was one of the finest in the city, and that his young host was evidently a man of great possessions, he began to wonder. For though the poor were ever ready to receive him as their brother, the rich were wont to

resent his call to poverty and simplicity of life; to them the door into the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth was indeed no greater than a needle's eye.

But when he saw how simple were the clothes of the youth, and how few his possessions in his great house, he marvelled yet more; and marking how he himself performed the office of a servant, washing their feet and serving them at supper, he looked on him and loved him greatly; for courtesy was ever dear to the soul of the "Knight-errant of Christ."

Ere long he discovered that this young man, Guy of Cortona, was in the habit of giving away to the poor all that he did not actually require for his most frugal needs.

That night, when Guy had brought them to the room prepared and had taken leave of them, Francis turned to his companion and said: "My brother, this dear youth, who is so grateful to God, and so courteous to the poor, is greatly desired by me for our Order. For be it known that courtesy is one of the properties of God, who, of His own courtesy, gives His sun to the just and the unjust: and courtesy, moreover, is the sister of charity, by which hatred is extinguished and love is cherished. I will therefore betake myself to prayer that God may call him forthwith into our Order."

His prayer was answered almost immediately, and Guy of Cortona within a few days was on his knees before Francis, entreating that he might be received into his company. So, having distributed all his goods to the poor, he received the friar's habit in the church of that city.

Now when they considered together as to the best

way of evangelizing that neighbourhood and town, they agreed that what was most needed was a constant reminder that this life on earth was not the end of all things, and should be lived best as a preparation for eternity. And they decided that the worldliness of the citizens could best be combated by the knowledge of men in their midst who were content—nay, overjoyed—to live a life of constant conversation with God, apart from all that to the worldly man makes life worth living.

So Francis and Guy chose together a hermitage in which the latter might dwell. At the foot of the hill upon which the city stands they found a group of rock caves, splashed by the waters of the rivulet which dashes down a steep ravine. Here Guy made his dwelling-place, climbing sometimes up the hill to preach to the citizens of Cortona, but living for the most part a life of contemplation and of manual labour. Others joined him in the days to come, and the 'Celle,' or caves where they dwelt, became the site of one of the most famous of Franciscan convents. But it never did a greater work than in those early days when the Franciscan ideal of brotherly love and courtesy was joined to the high ideal of renunciation of the pleasures of the world for the company of the Unseen God.

The second incident shows again that it was only by keeping true to the high personal ideal of Francis that the work of his followers could meet with real success.

When it was decided to carry the message to Bologna, that city famous for its law-schools, crowded with clever, sceptical youths, and full of

pride of intellect, the herald chosen by Francis was Brother Bernard, once the learned advocate of Assisi.

His appearance in the poor Franciscan habit in those busy streets was the signal for an outburst of mockery and violence. Stones and mud were flung at him, insults were hurled at his head. But when these onslaughts were met not with anger nor any sign of cringing cowardice, but with gentle courtesy and quiet acceptance, the mob of ribald youths began to wonder and to watch. Presently a wealthy citizen, one who was also learned in the law, took up the cause of his fellow-advocate, received him into his house, and presently set him with his companions in a house near the city walls.

Before many weeks had passed the young men of Bologna were ready to kneel to Bernard as he passed through their midst, reverencing him for his learning, but yet more for his sanctity of life. And then it was that the humble Franciscan began to fear for the consequences both to their souls and to his own, and fleeing from the city came to Francis and said: "The house of the Order is founded at Bologna: it is for you to bid the brethren maintain it; for me there is no more to be done there, because of the too great honour that is paid to me; for I fear lest I lose more than I gain."

And then while other and less striking personalities consolidated the work in the great city of Lombardy, Bernard, true to his ideal of humility, retired into obscurity.

In the *Fioretti* the story is told in all its charming simplicity.

It happened in the beginning of the Order that Francis sent Brother Bernard to Bologna, that there, according to the grace that God had given him, he should bear fruit unto God; and Brother Bernard, making the sign of the most holy Cross, departed and came unto Bologna.

And the children, seeing him in a strange and poor habit, offered him many insults and much ill-treatment, as they would have done to a fool; and Brother Bernard patiently and joyfully bore everything for the love of Christ: and in order to receive the more ill-treatment he went out purposely to the piazza of the city. There many children and men came about him, and some pulled his hood from behind, and some from before; others, in front, threw dust and stones upon him, and others pushed him from side to side; and Brother Bernard, always in the same manner, and with the same patience and with a joyful countenance, neither got annoyed nor troubled.

And as patience is a work of perfection and a proof of virtue, a doctor, learned in the law, seeing and considering within himself the great constancy of Brother Bernard, and how he was not disturbed during so many days by any contumely and ill-treatment, said within himself: "It is impossible that this should not be a holy man"; and approaching him he asked him, "Who art thou?"

And Brother Bernard, for reply, put his hand in his breast, and drew out the Rule of St Francis and gave it him to read.

And he, having read it, turned to his companions and said:

"Verily, this is the highest state of religion I have heard of; therefore this man and his companions are the holiest in the world, and he who ill-treats him commits a very great sin; for he should rather be highly honoured, considering he is a dear friend of God."

And Brother Bernard, by reason of his holy manner of life, began to be much honoured by the people; but he, as a true disciple of Christ and of the humble Francis, fearing lest the honours of the world should hinder the peace and salvation of his soul, departed one day and returned to Francis and spoke thus: "Father, the House is founded near to the city of Bologna; command the Brothers that

they maintain it and that they stay there; for I have no more profit there, because of the too great honour that is paid to me; for I fear lest I lose more than I gain."

Then Francis, hearing all these things, and how God had worked by Brother Bernard, returned thanks to God, who had thus begun and increased the number of the poor little disciples of the Cross.

It was early in the autumn of the year 1212 that the news of a great event in Spain roused Francis to try to find a new outlet for his missionary zeal. In the middle of the July of that year the forces of Christendom had overthrown the Moorish armies, and with them the power of Mohammed in the West, at the great battle of Las Navas.

To the world of Europe this meant nothing more than a terrific blow at the hated infidels. To Francis, in his infinite pity and love for the souls of men, it meant an opportunity to preach the Gospel of Christ to those who had hitherto been His foes, but who now, in their downfall, might become His penitents.

How this was to be done he cared little. It was enough that he should go forth to Syria as the "Troubadour of God," singing His praise, telling of His wondrous works. When the message had been given and the heathen had received it, it was for the Church to consolidate and organize those whom he hoped to draw within her borders. So, with one companion, and absolutely heedless of the risks attending such a journey, without money or safe-conduct, into the heart of the enemy's land, Francis set sail from Ancona. But the time was not yet ripe for this enterprise. Almost immediately a storm arose which wrecked his vessel upon the Dalmatian

coast. From there, penniless as he was, he could find no means of proceeding to Syria, and was fain to beg a passage back to Italy. The ship-masters, however, turned a deaf ear to the petitions of the two poorly clad friars, and it would have gone hardly with them had not they made friends with one of the crew, who hid them on board in the hold of the ship. Fortunately they had brought with them a good store of food, provided by a friend on shore, for the ship was long delayed from making port by the tempestuous weather, and the crew began to suffer from starvation. This was the opportunity for Francis to offer them his supply of provisions, and so to win their hearts.

Before the boat touched Ancona again Francis had made not a few converts among the members of that rough crowd of sailor-men.

It was, on this journey, his only measure of so-called success in converting the heathen. But the very fact of the attempt, and the spirit in which it was made, marks an epoch in the history of the Crusades. Up to this time the 'infidels,' as Europe termed them, had been regarded almost as devils, whom it was the duty of every Christian to stamp out by fire and sword.

In place of this Francis substituted the new ideal of a spiritual crusade which should draw them by bands of love and penitence within the City of God. Conversion was to take the place of conquest, and though many a long year had to pass before this could to any extent be carried out, we have abundant evidence in the next few centuries of the active missionary work of the Franciscan

friars among the Mohammedan population of the East.

After the apparent failure of their journey seemed to have closed the door in the direction of foreign missionary effort, there seems to have come upon the friar one of those strange clouds of depression and doubt of himself that beset from time to time even the most joyous and high-hearted of souls.

The futility of active work, of preaching and teaching as compared with a life of intimate and unbroken communion with the Unseen God, obsessed him. He recalled with something akin to envy that quiet hermitage where dwelt Guy of Cortona, amid deep quiet broken only by the song of birds and the splash of the falling rivulet. And just when he was communing within himself as to what might be the will of his Divine Captain in this matter, there came to him an offer that must have still further shaken his faith as to his mission as a preacher.

It was in the spring of 1213 that Francis, on one of his missions, arrived at the little town of Montefeltro, built like a raven's nest high up on a rocky ledge of the Apennines. Here he found a feudal festival in full progress in the courtyard of the Lord of Montefeltro; minstrels in their gay attire flitted hither and thither, knights in shining array prepared for the joust at arms, fair ladies thronged the terraced walks, and a great crowd of folk, from the noble to the peasant, filled all the space below.

True lover of chivalry that he was, Francis threw himself heart and soul into the spirit of the gay scene, applauding, laughing, joining in song and

merry jest with all the abandonment and keen enjoyment of his temperament and race.

The crowd, no doubt, glanced with good-tempered amusement at the little friar, in his worn brown habit, as they marked his eyes kindling at some fine point of song or tourney, and heard his voice loudest among the applause.

Suddenly, as there came a pause in the proceedings, they saw that the shabby figure of the stranger had pushed its way through, and was clambering up a parapet which commanded the assembly. Thence, looking down upon that motley throng, Francis, waving his hand, asked permission to speak.

"A minstrel! A minstrel! He enters the contest!" cried the laughing crowd; and Francis, mindful of the days when he had so often posed as leader at such feasts, smiled back joyfully and announced as the theme of his discourse the well-known couplet of a minstrel's song:

> So great the good I have in sight,
> In every hardship I delight.

In burning words he described the joy of the service of Christ, the glory of the Vision by which His soldiers were led, the happiness that came in the wake of pain and toil and struggle, the marvellous fulfilment of the "good in sight." And as they watched the friar, thin, emaciated even, but with eyes glowing with love and happiness, his voice thrilling with conviction, his whole figure radiant with anticipation of the glory that awaited him, some mocked, some turned away, and some remained lost in thought and amazement.

Among these last was one Orlando dei Cattani, a great lord and ruler of Chiusi. Awaking as though from a dream, this man followed Francis as he disappeared among the crowd, and when he found him begged that he might have conference with him as to the salvation of his soul. "Willingly, indeed," said Francis, "but not just now. This morning you must pay honour to your friends and dine with them, and after that we will converse together."

That conversation, which brought about the conversion of the nobleman, had also another result. The Lord Orlando offered Francis a place of retreat, far remote among the rocky heights of the "wind-swept Apennines," for himself or his brethren.

It had always been part of the Franciscan ideal that some of the friars should give themselves wholly, like Guy of Cortona, to a life of contemplation and prayer, and this gift of Monte Alvernia, hidden high among the peaks, came as an inspiration. Might not this unexpected offer be the outward sign of the will of God for himself? Was he not justified in relinquishing his active apostolate and retiring for the rest of his life to that peaceful solitude?

Fortunately for the world at that moment, Francis, distrusting his own judgment, sent one of his friars, Brother Masseo, to consult Sister Clare and Brother Sylvester, then in spiritual retreat, as to what the will of God might be. When Masseo returned Francis took him into a wood, and stretching himself in the form of a cross upon the earth, prepared to receive his message. It was unanimous. The vocation of Francis was to save the souls of

men, not by intercession alone, but by active preaching.

"Then let us go forth at once, in the name of God," cried Francis, with characteristic impatience of delay, and with Brothers Masseo and Angelo as his companions turned his face toward Spoleto.

It was on this journey, when his soul was freed from doubts and fears, that a new spiritual joy came to Francis, a joy that can only be compared with that which flooded his heart on the day that he first conquered his lower self and embraced the leper.

They were passing a rich corn country between Cannara and Bevagna, where the highroad is shaded here and there by groups of welcome trees, when Francis stopped and bade his companions notice how merry and continuous was the song of the innumerable birds that flocked among the branches. Celano tells the tale:

> And passing along, in fervour of soul, he lifted up his eyes and saw many trees standing by the way, and filled with a countless multitude of little birds; at which Francis wondered, and said to his companions: "Wait a little for me in the road, and I will go preach to my sisters the birds." And he entered into the field and began to preach to the birds that were on the ground. And suddenly those that were in the trees came around him, and together they all remained silent so long as it pleased Francis to speak; and even after he had finished they would not depart until he had given them his blessing. And although he went among them and touched them with his cloak, none of them moved.
>
> The substance of the sermon was this: "My little sisters, the birds, much beholden are you to God your Creator, and in all places you ought to praise Him, because He has given you liberty to fly about everywhere, and has given you double and triple raiment. And again ye are beholden

to Him for the element of the air, which He has appointed for you, and for that He feeds you, and gives you the brooks for your drink, the mountains and valleys for your refuge, and the tall trees wherein to make your nests. Wherefore your Creator loveth you much, since He has bestowed on you so many benefits. And so beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to please God."

As Francis spoke thus to them, all the multitude of these birds opened their beaks and stretched out their necks; and, opening their wings and reverently bowing their necks to the earth, by their acts and by their songs showed that the words of the holy father gave them the greatest delight. And Francis rejoiced and was glad with them, and marvelled much at such a multitude of birds, and at their beautiful variety, and their attention and familiarity. And he made the sign of the Cross over them and bade them depart; and thereupon all those birds rose in the air with wonderful singing; and after the fashion of the sign of the Cross that Francis had made, they flew toward east and west and north and south.

To the sweet and simple soul of Francis this comradeship with the birds of the air brought the keenest joy. It was as though a new sense had been given him, a sense which opened a door, closed to most of humankind, into a new world of creation—the world of birds and beasts. He had always loved this "lesser creation"; now he found he both loved and understood them as one understands and loves an intimate friend. The sense brought with it new power over the animal world.

He was on one of his journeys, says Celano, and had begun to preach to a group of listeners, when his words were drowned by the chirping of the swallows, who were building their nests hard by. "My sisters," cried he to them, "it is my turn now to speak; you have been talking all the time." And

St Francis and the Birds

the swallows at once ceased to twitter, and were silent till his voice had ceased.

Another charming tale from the *Fioretti* tells of how he tamed the wild turtle-doves.

> A certain youth had caught one day a great number of turtle-doves; and as he was taking them to market he met St Francis, who, having a singular compassion for these gentle creatures, looked at the doves with eyes of pity, and said to the youth:
>
> "O good youth, I pray you give me these gentle birds, to which in the Holy Scriptures chaste and humble and faithful souls are compared; and do not let them fall into the hands of cruel men who would kill them."
>
> And immediately the young man, being inspired by God, gave them all to St Francis; and he received them into his bosom, and said to them tenderly:
>
> "O my little sisters, simple, innocent, and chaste doves, why have you let yourselves be snared? See, I will snatch you from death, and make nests for you, wherein you may increase and multiply according to the commandment of our Creator."
>
> And St Francis went and made nests for them all; and they took to their nests, and began to lay eggs, and hatched them without fear before the eyes of the Brothers; and they were as tame and as familiar with St Francis and all the other Brothers as if they had been domestic fowls, always accustomed to be fed by them; and they would not depart until St Francis with his blessing gave them leave to go. And to the young man who had given them to him St Francis said:
>
> "Little son, thou wilt yet be a Brother in this Order, and wilt serve Jesus Christ nobly." And so it came to pass: for the said youth became a Brother, and lived in the Order in great sanctity.

Another time we hear of the cicala—the grasshopper—making her home in a fig-tree near his cell, and how she would come at his call and perch on his

finger. "Sing, my sister cicala," says Francis, "and praise the Lord thy Creator with a joyful song." And immediately the cicala would sing until Francis joined her in song: nor would she fly away unless he bade her go.

But it was not over birds and insects alone that Francis exercised his mystic power. The fierce beasts of the countryside also recognized in him a master and a friend.

It was while he was on a missionary quest in the city of Gubbio that

> there appeared in the countryside an exceeding great wolf, terrible and fierce, the which not only devoured animals, but also men, in so much that all the city folk stood in great fear, sith ofttimes he came nigh the city. And all men, when they went out, arrayed them in arms as it were for battle, and yet withal they might not avail to defend themselves against him whensoe'er any chanced on him alone; for fear of this wolf they were come to such a pass that none durst go forth of that place.
>
> Therefore St Francis, having compassion on the people, wished to go forth to that wolf, albeit the townsfolk all gave counsel against it. And making the sign of the holy Cross he went forth with his companions, putting all his trust in God. And the others misdoubting to go farther, St Francis alone took the road to the place where the wolf lay. And lo! in the sight of many of the townsfolk that had come out to see this miracle the said wolf made at St Francis with open mouth: and coming up to him St Francis made over him the sign of the Cross, and called him to him and spoke to him thus:
>
> "Come hither, Brother Wolf: I command you in the name of Christ that you do no harm to me nor to anyone."
>
> Oh, wondrous thing! when St Francis had thus made the holy sign, right so the terrible wolf did shut his jaws and stayed his running: and when he was bid, came gently as a lamb and lay him down at the feet of St Francis.

Then was there parleying with the beast; reproaches from the friar for his cruelty and violence were answered by the wolf

> with movements of body, tail, and eyes. And having made him promise never more to do harm to man, Francis said, "Brother Wolf, I will that you plight me troth for this promise, that I may trust you full well." And St Francis stretching forth his hand to take pledge of his troth, the wolf lifted up his right paw before him and laid it gently on the hand of St Francis, giving thereby such sign of good faith as he was able. Then quoth St Francis:
>
> "Brother Wolf, I bid you in the name of Christ, come now with me, nothing doubting, and let us go stablish this peace in God's name."
>
> And the wolf, obedient, set forth with him in fashion as a gentle lamb. . . . And thereafter this same wolf lived two years in Gubbio, and went like a tame beast in and out the houses, from door to door, without doing hurt to any, or any doing hurt to him, and was courteously nourished by the people. At length after two years space Brother Wolf died of old age; whereat the townsfolk sorely grieved, sith marking him pass so gently through the city, they minded them the better of the virtue and the sanctity of St Francis.

Such power over bird and beast is by no means unique in the history of mankind, and to dismiss these stories as picturesque medieval legends would be a mistake. There is nothing really abnormal in the gift that belongs to many simple, childlike natures of peeping into the hidden world of nature, and finding there much that is akin to themselves, and that can be understood by them. Such a relation is mutual, and the glance of such a one interchanged with horse or dog or cat needs no spoken words to establish an intercourse that cannot

be explained on the grounds that the animal is thus cowed into submission by fear of his human superior. The bond is one of friendship, of intimacy, and is best described by Francis himself, who called the birds his " sisters " and the fierce wolf of the forest his " brother."

CHAPTER X *Francis and Dominic*

> One, seraphic all
> In fervency ; for wisdom upon earth,
> The other, splendour of cherubic light.
> DANTE, *Paradiso* (Cary's trans)

THE year 1217 marks a turning-point in the story of Francis. In that year was held a 'General Chapter' or parliament of the members of his confraternity, a proceeding made necessary by the growth and expansion of the Order.

Up to this time the corporate life of the brothers, who were now widely scattered throughout Italy, had been maintained by yearly conferences, mostly at Assisi. These had taken the form of informal discussions, when each of the brothers laid before Francis and the others the amount of success or failure that had been his, and begged for advice or admonition. In such meetings as these the friars had shown very clearly the extent to which they depended upon their beloved founder. "They looked to him," says Father Cuthbert, "as their book of life." Unquestioningly they accepted his methods of carrying on the campaign against sin and indifference, if indeed the word 'method' is not out of place in a scheme which depended solely on Divine love and faith wherewith to win the hearts of men, and cared nothing at all for human ways and means.

But during the last three years the character of the Order had changed. Its numbers, to begin with, had very largely increased. It was still the wonderful

personality of Francis that was most powerful in attracting men to a life of penance and toil for souls. Of him more than of any other human being it might truthfully be said that he drew souls with cords of love. For him the sinner, inasmuch as he held within him a spark of the Divine Master, was an object of the warmest affection and interest; and this, of course, was the secret of Francis' power over him. A characteristic story tells how he taught his followers something of this spirit.

Upon the heights of Monte Casale was a den of robbers, men of evil life who kept the countryside in terror for miles round.

No property was safe from their depredations, and when food was scarce in wintertime the peasant folk, robbed of their scanty supplies, came nigh to starvation. The tale of wrong came to the ears of Francis by the mouth of the friars, who spoke in unmeasured terms of the wickedness of these men, who, they declared, were absolutely given over to the Devil.

"Not so," said Francis mildly. "Now try my plan of dealing with them. Invite them to your hermitage and satisfy them with plenty of good bread and wine; and when they are no longer hungry, speak to them of the love of God."

So this was done. But still the robbers hardened their hearts and continued in their evil ways.

"Do not despair," said Francis, when this was reported. "Invite them again, and give them this time a better meal, of cheese and eggs; and when they have eaten tell them how the love of God would have them live honestly in this world

and to do penance, that they may reign with Him hereafter."

Touched by the practical kindness of the brothers' appeal, the robbers began to frequent the hermitage, bringing in firewood for their hosts, and sharing from time to time their humble meals. And so in time they ceased to live upon their ill-gotten gains and began to work for their living. Three of these men even sought admission into the Order, and became in the future three of its most devout members.

By such gentle means as this was the work of the friars carried out in those early years of happy growth; and we are not surprised to hear of the warm welcome and deep affection with which they were received wherever they appeared.

It was as though their coming brought a sweet and healthful breeze into the stagnant places of Italy, which blew away the spirit of faction, of quarrelling, and strife, and before which heresy, unbelief, and ignorance were scattered. They did not argue; they had no need to uphold the claims of a Church which they took for granted, or of doctrines which were as much a part of themselves as the air they breathed.

The simple faith and loving heart of Francis were their constant inspiration in those early years; and in the truest sense his spirit breathed upon the land of his birth.

But there was another reason for the rapid growth and development of the Franciscan Order.

Two years before that General Chapter which marks, as we have said, a crisis in its history, the Order had received an unexpected confirmation and

recognition at the great Council of the Lateran in 1215; a meeting that has well been called the "Great Reforming Council of the Middle Ages."

It was the last attempt of Pope Innocent III to carry out that vast scheme of reorganization and reform which had been his ideal for all his adult years. Held in the great church of St John Lateran, the Council represented a vast army of forces, both spiritual and temporal, drawn from every part of Christendom. Kings and princes sent their proxies, archbishops and bishops, abbots, doctors of theology and law, had assembled in Rome "as in the exalted citadel whence the best public opinion of the age was to send forth its decrees for the ordering of the Christian nations." [1]

Ignorance, worldliness, infidelity, were to be met face to face, and, above all, the disloyalty which allowed the Holy Sepulchre of Christ to remain in the hands of infidels was to be swept away by the rough wind of a new crusade.

This vast assembly the humble Francis—the "Little Poor Man of Assisi"—was bidden to attend, as the founder of a new Order in the Church.

From his distant corner near a pillar Francis gazed up the vast nave to where the impressive figure of Innocent stood, white-robed, on the raised platform. Through the great church the Pope's clear voice rang out as he described the need of this assembly to consider how the Church might best reform her own shortcomings, and, making good the failings which the process of time and the weakness of human nature had brought about, might best go forth to

[1] Baronius, *Annales.*

wield her newly burnished weapons against the sinful world.

A thrill passed through the brown-frocked friar as he heard the call to arms, the call to "remember Jerusalem," and to rescue "that city of sorrow who appeals to all who pass by to see if there be any sorrow like hers; and shame and disgrace shall be to them who pass by unheeding."

Was not the message for him—for him who once had set out and had been turned back from his quest?

But again the Pope was speaking, and now it seemed to him of Francis himself. To him the Lord had said: "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and mark *Tau* upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and mourn for all the abominations that are committed in the midst thereof."

It was the mystic's call to the clerical order, a call for reform and penance, a call to a life of strict self-denial and high example to their people. To Francis it came as a veritable illumination. For *Tau* was the sign of penance, the mark of the Cross, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet; what could better express the spirit of the sons of humility and long-suffering for the cause of Christ? From that time he adopts it as the symbol of his Order, marks it on every Franciscan dwelling-place, subscribes his letters with it, bears it in his very soul.

Meantime the Great Council was moving to its close. Inspired by the words and still more by the spirit of its leader, it had ordained a crusade against the infidels, and issued decrees for the purging from

worldly ambition of the clerical courts, and the appointment of men of holy life to preach the Word of God as bishops.

The crusade came to nothing, for the times were out of joint for such an enterprise ; but the cry for reform in every part of society which was, as has well been said, " the cry of the age for a more Christian life among clergy and laity," was to bear good fruit in days to come.

One important result of this Fourth Lateran Council was the formal recognition given to the two new orders of friars within the Church. We have seen how Francis, founder of the Friars Minor, had been summoned to attend as their representative, and how eagerly he had listened to the sermon of Pope Innocent.

Much of it had, indeed, seemed like a personal message to himself ; and there is little doubt that Innocent, keen of insight and wise of spiritual vision, had already seen in these wandering bands of preachers the fighting infantry of his new army of reform.

But there was also present in that great assembly another, wearing the Black Friars' robe, who had come from Spain in eager haste to obtain the leave of the Pope to found another Order of penance, and who, in days to come, was to stand side by side with Francis as a great leader of men.

Some eleven years before the birth of Francis a son was born in Old Castile to the noble lady Joanna, wife of Don Felix da Guzman. He was a child of many dreams and of many prayers. His mother had seen him before his birth standing brave and

steadfast, bearing a torch in his hands which lighted up the whole earth. Another noble dame, godmother to the boy, saw him in her dream with a gleaming star on his white forehead, and another with a crown upon his head.

So they called him Dominic, the "hound of the Lord," and waited in faith that his destiny should be fulfilled. The story goes that a swarm of bees once settled upon the mouth of the eight-year-old boy, a sure sign in the medieval world of the gift of eloquence. In the famous university of his province he won high distinction, and even more was he known for his tender generosity to the poor. A famous story shows him in the porch of the cathedral, the usual lecture-room of medieval universities, forming one of an attentive group gathered round the professor. To them approached a sad-faced woman who began to beg of the lads, saying that her son, also a student, had been captured by Moorish bandits as he journeyed from town to town asking for alms wherewith to carry on his education. Her one hope was to raise enough money for his ransom, but though the boys gave what they had, it did not nearly amount to the sum required.

"Let me go as prisoner in his stead," cried the generous Dominic, and was only prevented from taking the captive's place by the determined opposition of his parents.

Even his precious books, his desk, and pen were sacrificed by him when he saw the poor in need of bread; but most of all he longed for the day when he might go forth to carry spiritual food to starving souls.

In the year 1203, three years before the conversion

of Francis, Dominic was chosen to be the companion of the Bishop of Osma, where he was then a canon, upon an embassy to Denmark. It was on their return through the south of France that the two men found themselves in the thick of a warfare between the Count of Toulouse, leader of the heretic faction known as the Albigenses, and Simon de Montfort, father of the " good Earl Simon " who strove so hard to reform the state of government in England in the reign of Henry III.

In the midst of this strife Dominic and his bishop gave themselves up to the work of preaching to and teaching the ignorant population of those provinces. The Bishop indeed was so impressed with the need that he gave up his dignified position and, keeping only Dominic with him, went about from place to place, " preaching the truth that they might destroy error." From that time Dominic never lost hold of his idea that such a work might well be undertaken by an order of preaching friars, who, unlike the monks, should journey on foot from town to town, village to village, and by the example of their poverty and disciplined lives, as well as by their clear teaching of the faith, should convert many souls.

This Order of Preachers differed in many ways from the Franciscans. They were to be priests, men of learning, thoroughly trained and educated, eloquent in speech, or at least willing to be taught to preach. Study as well as teaching was to be their constant occupation ; they were to live lives of strict self-denial, and follow a Rule of life as laid down by St Augustine.

Of the crowd of aspirants to enter the new Order

sixteen were chosen by Dominic as fulfilling the conditions. They were of different nationalities, and two of them were Englishmen. They wore a rough black serge cloak—hence their name of "Black Friars"—over a white habit, bound with a leathern girdle, sandals on their feet, and a small 'scrip' in which to carry a copy of the Gospels.

Before the new Order could be constituted it was necessary to obtain the Pope's permission; hence it was that at that Lateran Council of 1215, twelve years after the first design of such an Order had crossed the mind of the founder, Dominic was present, as well as Francis, in order to obtain the sanction of Innocent III.

Probably Francis had never heard of Dominic, and Dominic's first knowledge of Francis was perhaps gathered on his journey to Rome through Italy, where, in every province, he would hear something of the wonderful work of the "Little Poor Man of Assisi." The story of their meeting has been immortalized in the beautiful terra-cotta of Andrea della Robbia three centuries later. In a dream on the night of his arrival in Rome Dominic had seen the figure of Christ carrying arrows wherewith to punish the world for its wickedness. To Him there approached His blessed Mother, bringing with her two men who should convert the people and turn the arrows of wrath into shafts of divine mercy. In one of these men he recognized himself: the other he knew not. Next day, in the streets of Rome, he met Francis and recognized in him the man of his dream. At once he claimed his friendship and, embracing him with fervour, said: "You are my

comrade, and we will run together. If we stand side by side nothing can prevail against us."

Thus was cemented an alliance between two men who stood for the two principles that the mediæval world most needed—law and liberty. If their methods and ideals differed widely, there was no real contradiction between these two principles, since it is only by the self-discipline that comes by obedience to law that the spirit of true liberty can be attained.

No man was quicker to realize this than the great Pope of the thirteenth century, and recognition for both Orders was readily and gladly granted. For a moment there seemed a likelihood that Cardinal Ugolino, one of the most famous churchmen of the day, would insist that their Orders should furnish candidates for future bishoprics; but both refused point-blank, in horror at the loss of the spirit of evangelical poverty and humility that such a position would involve. It was on leaving the house of Ugolino that Dominic, although the elder by eleven years, gave such striking proof of the reverence he felt for the founder of the Friars Minor, a man so far removed from himself by birth, learning, and intellect. Kneeling at the feet of Francis, the Spanish friar begged that he would give him the cord he wore as girdle that he might wear it in memory of him. In his humility Francis would have refused the request, but when Dominic insisted he gave it him. Girding himself with it, Dominic clasped his hand, and presently said, "Brother Francis, I would that your Order and mine were one, and that we might live under the same Rule."

St Francis and St Dominic

But the world needed them both, with their separate aims and ideals; though the love and respect they bore to one another finds an echo in the words of Dominic to his companions when the "Little Poor Man" had set out upon his journey home. "In truth I tell you that all religions should imitate this holy man Francis, so perfect is his holiness."

His is the generous spirit that Dante expresses in his vision of Paradise, when he makes a Dominican monk sing the praises of Francis, and a Franciscan those of Dominic. And so we find it even to this day, when on the Feast of Dominic the sermon is always preached by a Franciscan, and by a Dominican on St Francis' day.

Probably in their lifetime they seldom met again; but a characteristic story is told of them when at one time they were both working on their different lines in the city of Cremona.

The poor were suffering just then from something akin to famine, and this the Franciscans, dependent as they were upon charity for their own daily bread, could do little to remedy. Distressed at their need, Dominic was inclined to blame Francis for apparently caring only for their souls, and to point out the advantage of his own Order in being able to give relief. But Francis only smiled at his distress and assured him that all would be well. Sure enough, his ardent preaching against self-indulgence and love of this world's goods so touched the hearts of the wealthy inhabitants that they sent food in plenty to the poorer citizens without the need of asking for a single alms. Dominic was much impressed. "Of a truth," he cried, "God hath especial care of these

holy poor little ones, and I knew it not. From henceforth I and my Order shall likewise embrace the Lady Poverty."

From that day it was decreed that the Dominican should hold no property, and depend upon charity for his daily bread. And so we leave Dominic for the present; and in the words of Dante,

> Forth on his great apostleship he fared,
> Like torrent bursting from a lofty vein.

We begin to see now how this great Council at Rome was going to affect the future work of Francis. Openly recognized by authority, the first by rank of creation of the two great Orders of friars in Europe, supported by the most powerful cardinal of the Roman Court, the friars now began to increase very rapidly in numbers and in popularity.

And so it came about that the General Chapter of the brothers which met at the Portiuncula in the Whitsuntide of 1217, two years after the Council of the Lateran, marked a turning-point in Franciscan history. From all parts of Italy the brothers flocked to what was in a very special sense their father's house, and there, with him in their midst, they built for themselves green huts made from the branches of trees, fresh with spring foliage; and there with much prayer and meditation they discussed how best they might do the service of their Divine Master.

Hundreds of friars met on this occasion; and it was evident from the very fact of the rapid growth in numbers that some kind of organization must be arranged for the Order. No longer was it possible

for each to be dependent upon the advice and gentle admonitions of Francis, as in former days.

The whole of Italy was now to be divided into 'provinces,' and over the friars who worked in each was to be set a 'Provincial' or superior. But though Francis could no longer be the one Provincial for the whole province of Italy, he was determined that the bond between the governor and the governed should be still that of the father, or even more, the mother of a family. He would have no relation similar to that of overlord and vassal, and the Provincial must himself set an example of "service and subjection." The friars must obey him in all things, but in the spirit of "knightly fealty and service" rather than that of the servant or the slave.

Yet, safeguard it as he would, Francis knew that this system of government, necessary as it was, must perforce lose something of the brotherly love and generous service that had been the characteristic of his little band in early days. And, though he was ever full of longing desire for the extension of Christ's kingdom, it was with something of the sadness that a father feels when his sons go forth into the world and leave the old home that he called for volunteers to go beyond the Alps. Not for long, however, did such a mood endure. The spirit of adventure was as strong in him as in the youngest novice of his flock. His own particular province had not yet been chosen by him, and when he saw these young and ardent souls ready to brave all manner of unknown dangers as true knights of the Cross, his heart burned within him and he would not stay behind.

"My best beloved," said he in private to some of

his closest companions, " it is but right that I should be a pattern and example to all the brethren. I have sent brethren to face all kinds of labour, shame, and want in distant lands. It is but fair then that I should myself go forth and suffer all that they may have to endure ; that they may endure it patiently in their turn. Pray for me, therefore, that I may choose that province where I may work best for the glory of God and the good of souls."

Then the brothers prayed as he asked ; and on their return Francis, with joyful face, announced that he had chosen the land of France, that country of chivalry and song from which long ago he had taken his name.

Then the friars went forth upon their journeyings to lands unknown, with the words of Francis ringing in their ears.

" Go forth two and two in the name of the Lord, taking the road in all humility and modesty. Pray to the Lord in your hearts, and let no idle or useless word be spoken among you. For though you be walking abroad, let your conduct be as humble and becoming as in a hermitage or cell. Brother Body is our cell, and the soul as a hermit dwells within to pray and meditate upon the Lord. Of little use is a cell made with hands if the soul is not at rest within it."

And so the wider apostolate of the sons of Francis was begun.

CHAPTER XI: *The Joy of Francis*

O Brother Leo, write that it is in this that there is Perfect Joy.
ST FRANCIS, *Parable of Perfect Joy*

WE saw in the last chapter how the sons of Francis were sent forth, two and two, to carry their message of joy and hope to the world. It was a vast enterprise, conceived in a spirit of childlike faith; and like many another crusade for the ideal its beginnings were clouded and dark with apparent failure.

Francis himself never got farther than Florence on his road to France. There he was met by Cardinal Ugolino, that prelate of weight and influence in Christendom, who persuaded the friar not to abandon the land of his birth, on the ground that there was much opposition in high quarters to his work in Italy, and that he must be on the spot to uphold his own cause. In his beautiful simplicity of soul Francis would have left all that to chance rather than seem to fall short of the ideal he had set before his missioners.

"My lord," he argued, "it will be much shame to me if, having sent others of my brethren into far countries, I myself remain in these parts and do not share in the hardships and troubles that await them."

The Cardinal hinted that it would perhaps have been better for all to remain in Italy rather than face suffering and probably death abroad. But the friar rebuked him with eager words: "Think you, my lord, that it is only to these provinces that the

Lord hath sent the brethren? Of a truth I tell you that God hath sent them for the profit and salvation of the souls of all the men that are in the world; and not only in the countries of the faithful, but even in the lands of the infidel, shall they be received, and gain many souls."

The Cardinal gave way before the energy of his conviction, but he would not rest till he had persuaded Francis to remain, for the present at least, in Italy. With humility, but also with keen regret, the friar gave up the chivalrous adventure upon which he had set out with so glad a heart. A story from the *Fioretti* shows him on his traveller's path, and well illustrates the temper of his mind at this time.

> The wonderful servant and follower of Christ, to wit St Francis, to the end that he might in all things conform himself perfectly unto Christ, who, as the Gospel saith, sent His disciples forth by two and two unto all the cities and places where He himself was purporting to go, seeing that after the pattern of Christ he had gathered together twelve companions, sent them forth by two and two to preach throughout the world. And to give them an ensample of true obedience he was himself the first to go, after the pattern of Christ, who began to do before he taught. Wherefore, having allotted to his companions the other parts of the world, he, with Brother Masseo as his companion, took the road that led to the land of France.
>
> And coming one day to a certain town, and being very hungry, they went to beg bread for the love of God; Francis going down one street and Brother Masseo down another. But because Francis was a man of mean appearance and small of stature, accounted a vile beggar by those who knew him not, he received nothing but a few mouthfuls and crumbs of dry bread; whilst Brother Masseo, being tall and comely in person, had good pieces, and large and many

given to him, and entire loaves. When they had begged enough they went together to a place outside the town, where there was a fair fountain, that they might eat, and beside which was also a broad and convenient stone, on which each placed all the alms that he had begged.

And Francis, seeing that the pieces of bread that Brother Masseo had were larger and better than his own, had great joy and spoke thus: "O Brother Masseo, we are not worthy of so great treasure!"

And as he repeated these words several times, Brother Masseo answered him: "Father, how can this be called treasure, when we are in such poverty, and lack the things of which we have need? We who have neither cloth nor knives, nor plates nor porringer, nor house nor table, nor manservant nor maidservant!"

Then said Francis, "And this is what I call great treasure, that there is nothing here provided by human industry, but everything is provided by Divine Providence, as we see clearly in this bread that we have begged, in this stone which serves so beautifully for our table, and in this so clear fountain; and therefore I desire that we should pray to God that He would cause holy Poverty, which is a thing so noble that God Himself was made subject to it, to be loved by us with our whole heart."

It was in the spirit of this "poverty of soul" that Francis gave up his desire for the present and returned to Assisi.

The story of those whom he had sent forth is told in these few words in the *Legend of the Three Companions.*

They were received in certain provinces, but were not permitted to build dwelling-places; and from other provinces they were expelled in the fear that they might prove to be infidels: since although the lord Innocent III had sanctioned their Order and Rule, yet he had not confirmed it by letter; for which reason the brethren endured many trials from clerics and laymen. Wherefore the brethren were compelled to flee from divers provinces, and thus straitened

and afflicted, sometimes even robbed and beaten by thieves, they returned in great bitterness of spirit to the Blessed Francis.

"The time for sending forth was not yet come." So one of the brothers explains this gloomy frustration of a happy enterprise. For Francis it was the beginning of troubles, which, though they could never spoil his inward joy and peace, yet could overshadow his path and darken counsel. Already were heard the mutterings of discontent, and a demand for greater worldly prudence in their leader.

It is to this period of spiritual stress and discomfort that belongs one of the finest of the personal utterances of Francis, his *Parable of Perfect Joy*, as set forth in the *Fioretti*.

As Francis went once on a time from Perugia to St Mary of the Angels with Brother Leo, in the winter, they suffered greatly from the severity of the cold; and Francis called to Brother Leo, who was going on a little in advance: "O Brother Leo, although the Friars Minor in these parts give a great example of sanctity and good edification, write it down and note it well that this is not perfect joy."

And having gone on a little farther, he called to him the second time: "O Brother Leo, even though the Friars Minor should give sight to the blind, and loose the limbs of the paralysed, cast out devils, and give hearing to the deaf; and although they should raise to life those who had been dead four days, write that in all this there is not perfect joy."

Going still a little farther, Francis cried aloud again, "O Brother Leo, thou little sheep of God, even though the Friars Minor spoke with the tongues of angels, and knew the courses of the stars, and the virtues of herbs, and though to them were revealed all the treasures of the earth, and the virtues of birds and of fishes and of all animals, and of men, of trees also, and of stones and roots and waters, write that not in this is perfect joy."

And going yet a little while on the way, Francis called

aloud, "O Brother Leo, even though the Friars Minor should preach so well that they should convert all the infidels to the Faith of Christ, write that herein is not perfect joy."

And as he spake in this manner during two good miles, Brother Leo in great astonishment asked of him and said: "Father, I pray thee, for God's sake, tell me wherein is perfect joy."

And Francis replied to him: "When we shall have come to St Mary of the Angels, soaked as we are with the rain and frozen with the cold, encrusted with mud, and afflicted with hunger, and shall knock at the door: if the porter should come and ask angrily, 'Who are you?' and we replying, 'We are two of your Brethren,' he should say, 'You speak falsely; you are two good-for-nothings who go about the world stealing alms from the poor; go your way.' And if he would not open the door to us, but left us without, exposed till night to the snow and the wind and the torrents of rain, in cold and hunger: then, if we should bear so much abuse and cruelty and such a dismissal patiently, without disturbance and without murmuring at him, and should humbly think that this porter knew us truly, and that God would have him speak against us, O Brother Leo, write that this would be perfect joy. And if we should continue to knock, and he should come out in a rage, and should drive us away as importunate villains, saying, 'Depart from this house, vile thieves; go to the poorhouse, for you shall neither eat nor be lodged here'; if we should sustain this with patience and with love, O Brother Leo, write that this would be perfect joy.

"And if, constrained by hunger and the cold and the night, we should knock yet again, and beg him with many tears, for the love of God, that he would open to us and let us in, and he should say still more angrily: 'These are importunate rascals, I will pay them well for this as they deserve,' and should come out furiously, with a knotted stick, and seize hold of us by our hoods, and throw us to the earth, and roll us in the snow, and beat us all over our bodies; if we should bear all these things patiently and with joy, thinking on the pains of the Blessed Christ, O Brother Leo, write that it is in this that there is Perfect Joy."

Meantime, while Francis was thus training his sons in the high acceptance of hardships, his own time of trial was fast approaching. Outwardly, during the two years that followed the Chapter Meeting of 1217, the Order flourished exceedingly in Italy.

The interest and sympathy of Cardinal Ugolino, quick to see the vast spiritual resources of the Franciscan movement, had gradually established the fraternity as a part of the great army of reform, under the direct command of the Holy See. This was not done without keen opposition. It is true that the Dominicans, the Friars Preachers, had already won their position, and were now going forth to all quarters of the world openly accredited as the militia of the Church. But their work of teaching doctrine and expelling heresy was easy of understanding, and to the very men to whom it most appealed the ideals of Francis seemed fanciful and vague. His friend Innocent III had passed away; Honorius sat in the Chair of Peter, and it needed all Ugolino's powers of persuasion to make the latter see in Francis anything but a fanatic, or at best a visionary.

It is said that in his zeal the Cardinal arranged that Francis should preach before the Pope and the papal Court, and in his anxiety that a sound impression of practical common sense should be given, he persuaded the friar to write his sermon and learn it by heart. But when he found himself face to face with those whom he so ardently desired to convince of the truth of his mission, and of his call from God, Francis let himself go, and in the true fashion of the "Troubadour of God" poured forth the torrent of his

love and hope and faith, while " his feet danced to the music of his words." [1]

The conventions of the papal Court were outraged, but interest was roused ; before he ended, many of the stern-faced cardinals were fain to hide their tears. He had won the Pope and his Court, but he had yet to win the allegiance of his new followers to his own ideals of poverty and simple faith.

When, after a preaching tour, he arrived at the Portiuncula in that Whitsuntide of 1219, he found to his astonishment and grief that a fine building of stone had been built near the chapel for the use of the friars now crowding in from every direction. It had been put up by the citizens of Assisi, not so much in disrespect for his well-known opinions, as in the hope of showing him the futility of a strict adherence to his ideal. The fact that the brothers had permitted such an act cut Francis to the heart. Summoning some of them to his aid, he at once climbed upon the roof and began throwing down the building, stone by stone. Word of this reached Assisi, and some of the more influential citizens hastened down to put a stop to the destruction. " This building is not yours," they cried ; " it belongs to our city." To the dismay of Francis their view was upheld by one of the brethren, an English friar named Barton.

Sadly he replied, " If so be this house is yours, of course I have no right to touch it," and as sadly descended among the silent brothers.

Whether they actually used the hall we know not. We may hope that the majority, at least, were

[1] Celano.

content with the huts made of interwoven wattle-branches which have earned for this meeting the name of the " Chapter of Huts."

Ugolino himself presided at this Chapter, which is another landmark in Franciscan history. To a man less humble than Francis it must have been a gratifying sight to see that great prince of the Church, in all his rich array, riding toward the barefoot army of the friars that slowly passed to meet him along the mountain road; and still more to see the Cardinal dismount, strip off crimson robe and shoes, and walk in his white tunic, barefoot, behind them, to the door of the chapel. To Francis it meant less than to most of those present. The approbation of the great was a small thing beside the urgent need he saw of preserving the true spirit of the Order—the spirit of Poverty and Obedience and Prayer and Patience—as the one means of saving the souls of men and reforming an evil world.

Then the Chapter met, and, as though in spiritual restitution for the cloud that their defection had brought upon his soul, the friars decided that a definite mission to the infidels should now be undertaken, and that Francis himself should go forth to preach the Gospel to the Mohammedans in Egypt.

CHAPTER XII: *Ideals and Disillusions*

In thirst of martyrdom, in the proud presence of the Soldan, he preached Christ and His followers.

DANTE, *Paradiso* (Wicksteed's trans.)

WHEN Francis, for the second time, turned his face to the East, it seemed as though his favourite ideal was about to be realized. It had always been his hope that he might carry the message of the Gospel to the open enemies of the Cross, and the obstacles which hitherto had blocked his path had only intensified that hope. Now those obstacles seemed to have melted away.

Even Cardinal Ugolino, practical man of affairs as he was, realized that "God's Troubadour" must answer to the call of chivalry, and made no hindrance to his going.

So, with twelve disciples, Francis set out like his Master before him, sailed to Acre, which was strongly held by the crusading army, and thence passed on to Damietta, then the scene of a fierce siege on the part of the Christian forces.

Here for the first time came the shadow of disillusion. To Francis that army, lying before the city under the very arms of the Cross of Christ, was seen through a veil of romance that was of the very essence of medieval chivalry. Here surely was the vision that was to lead men *per aspera ad astra*—through rough ways to the stars—men who had sacrificed everything in the sacred cause of the Cross against the infidel.

But the reality was a very different matter. By

far the majority of that army of the Cross had taken arms merely for the love of plunder, for the licence of a freebooter's career, or, at best, for desire of adventure. Most of them lived lives of open vice, and the voice of one who spoke of high ideals was to them but a sound of mockery in their ears. To them, indeed, would Francis gladly have carried his message of penance, of reform; but they would not hear him.

To the prophetic vision of the friar it was clear that such an army could never claim by right that God was on its side; and when he heard of the great assault that was being planned for that month of August, he knew that disaster lay before it. He was troubled in mind as to whether he should warn the leaders of their coming fate.

"If I tell them what will happen to them," said he to one of his followers, "they will call me a fool; if I say nothing, my conscience will reproach me. Tell me, therefore, what shall I do?"

To which the friar replied, "The judgment of men is surely nought to thee; for it is not now that they will begin to call thee fool."

So he uttered his warning; and the leaders jeered at him as they went forward to the assault. Turning away his face, Francis would not look upon the fight, but sent a brother three times to tell him how it went. The third time news was brought that the Christian army was retreating in disarray and with very heavy loss.

During the breathing-space that intervened before hostilities recommenced, Francis, in perfect simplicity of heart, had taken a desperate step. He had,

as a preliminary, sought out the papal legate, who, as representative of the Pope, accompanied the army, and asked for leave to go over to the Soldan's camp. The legate thought him mad.

"Do you not know that the Soldan has offered a golden ducat for the head of any Christian laid before him?" he asked, half in curiosity, half in contempt.

"For that I care not at all. Only grant me permission," said the friar. The legate shrugged his shoulders. He would not be answerable for the consequences, but Francis could go on his own responsibility. "Only let him behave himself so as not to bring shame on the name of Christian."

So, with Brother Illuminato as his only companion, Francis set forth, and at the threshold of the Moslem camp was seized by the soldiers on guard. Neither of them could speak a sentence in their enemies' tongue, but Francis cried out, "Soldan! Soldan!" so incessantly that the Saracens, impressed by his indifference to their rough handling, brought him to the Soldan's camp. There he could address the officers in the *lingua franca*, common to many nationalities, and boldly announced that he had come to preach the Gospel to the Soldan. The courtiers were interested in so unusual a personality. It is even possible that they had heard of Francis already, for the high-bred Saracen of that day was a traveller, interested in all modern developments, and withal very much of a courteous gentleman.

Without taking him very seriously, they obtained an audience for the newcomer from their chief.

There is a story told of this interview which

illustrates both the subtlety of the Eastern mind and the quick wit of the Saint. When Francis was about to enter the tent the Soldan ordered a carpet, in which crosses were woven as a pattern, to be spread at the entrance. "If he tread on the crosses," remarked the Soldan, "I will accuse him of insulting his God; if he refuse to walk on it, I will accuse him of insulting me."

Francis promptly walked across the carpet, upon which the Soldan taunted him with trampling on the Cross which he professed to adore. "It matters not at all," replied Francis at once. "You must know that our Lord died between two crosses upon which hung two thieves. We Christians have the true Cross: the crosses of the thieves we have left to you, and these I am not ashamed to tread upon."

Either his ready response, or something far deeper which was quickly discerned by the clever, keen-eyed Moslem Emperor, appealed to Melek-el-Kamil. He listened courteously to the eloquence of the friar's message, and, ordering his officers to see to his well-being, bade him come again and speak with him on the morrow. They met several times, and so far was the Soldan impressed by the personality of Francis, if not by his teaching, that he begged him to remain permanently at his Court.

"Gladly will I remain if you and your Court will embrace the true faith," said Francis. But the Soldan shook his head. He was, no doubt, a rationalist at heart; Christ or Mohammed meant little to him, though he knew a man when he saw one, and how to value a soul so exceptional as that which now faced him in this fearless fashion. Then

Francis began to urge him. "If you want a test as to the merits of Christ or Mohammed, command that a great fire be made, and I, with your priests, will walk through it, that you may see which is the worthy and the true."

"But none of my priests would accept such a challenge," smiled Melek-el-Kamil.

"Then, if you will promise for yourself and your people that you will turn to the true faith, I will enter the fire alone," cried Francis, "provided that if I am burnt up you will ascribe it to my sins, and if I am safe, to the divine power of Christ."

But the Soldan still held back, explaining that his conversion would mean an insurrection among his people. Yet, it is said, he asked Francis to pray continually that he might come to know the true faith before his death. He would, moreover, have loaded the friar with gifts, but Francis would have none of them. Sadly he returned to the Christian lines, under the courteous safe-conduct of his late host, and sadly he faced the hardly concealed jeers of his own people.

In the *Fioretti* we have, as sequel to this adventure, a charming legend which tells how, on leaving the Soldan, Francis promised that after his own death he would send two of his brethren who should baptize the infidel into the Church of Christ. Years later, when Francis had long given up his soul to God, the Soldan fell very sick, and, remembering the promise of the Saint, set guards at various passes to look for the coming of two brothers wearing the Franciscan habit. At that very time, says the legend, Francis appeared to two brothers and bade

them go without delay to the Soldan, and take care of his salvation, as he had promised; and at their hands he received baptism, "and his soul was saved through the merits and prayers of Saint Francis."

Thus there was fulfilled and thus passed away the dream that had lit up the middle period of the life of Francis. In the eyes of the world his mission to the East had been a failure, and its chief result a sore sickness of body that was never again to leave him.

But to the chivalric soul of Francis there was still the comfort of a call fulfilled, a pledge redeemed. The "Knight of Christ" had followed the gleam, and though it led but to the apparent darkness and gloom of ill-success, he had seen far off the glory on the heights, and his soul was satisfied.

Heavy trials were now in store for him, sore disillusions, disappointments that touched what lay nearest his heart, the well-being and integrity of his Order; but through the mists of trouble that were to darken his later years there must have shone a glimpse of the colour and romance which tinged his adventure in the East, and brought him comfort in the days of gloom.

Scarcely had he landed at Venice on his return journey when he heard that in his absence some extraordinary changes had taken place among his fraternity. The Provincials, to whom had been delegated the government of the various districts where the friars worked, had eagerly agreed to certain suggestions made by Cardinal Ugolino, the protector and patron of the Order, and by carrying these out to their fullest extent had practically altered the whole character of the Friars Minor. Briefly speaking,

the changes were as follows. A definite organization was to be established, under 'Constitutions,' which brought the friars much more into line with the monastic institutions of the day. Large convents, in which a number of the brethren could live in community, were to take the place of the cave-dwellings, tiny hermitages, and humble cottages which had hitherto sheltered a few at a time. When the friars travelled abroad they were to do so under 'Letters of Protection' from cardinals and bishops, which assured the authorities of their orthodoxy; and no friar was to wander about without a letter of permission from his Provincial.

There is no doubt that something akin to these restrictions was necessitated by the growth of the Order, and its recognized position; but to the mind of its founder they meant the destruction of all he held most valuable in it. They might appeal to the mind of Cardinal Ugolino, a clever man of affairs, but never to the mind of Francis, who saw in them the death of that true liberty of soul, that childlike faith in God's protection, and, above all, of that spirit of Poverty, which were the keystones of the Order.

All that had been done in his absence seemed to him rank disloyalty, and it was in great heaviness of soul as well as weakness of body that he set off, riding upon an ass, from Venice to Bologna.

Yet that his personal humility was strong as ever is seen by a little incident of that same journey. He was accompanied by Brother Leonardo, of a noble family in Assisi, who, as he trudged behind the ass on the dusty road under a blazing sun, began

inwardly to fret against the discomforts of the way, and to envy Francis for his easier mode of travelling.

"In the world," muttered Leonardo ill-temperedly, "my folk would scorn even to walk beside the Bernadone, and now am I obliged to trudge behind his son as he rides."

Scarcely had he uttered this complaint in his mind when to his astonishment Francis hastily dismounted, saying to him, "Take my place, brother, for it is indeed unbecoming that I should ride while you, a man of noble blood, are obliged to walk afoot."

In a moment Leonardo, in bitter sorrow and repentance, had thrown himself at Francis' feet and craved his pardon; and so in mutual love and penitence they came together to Bologna.

There a heavy blow awaited the founder. He discovered that Peter, the Provincial of Lombardy, had erected a large and handsome convent as a school of study for the friars, and had, moreover, claimed it as the private property of the Order. The stab was twofold, for Francis was utterly opposed to emulating the Dominican Order in their cultivation of the intellect and devotion to theological study; indeed, his object in sending Bernardo to this hotbed of intellectualism had been to fight with the weapon of Gospel simplicity alone against the mental pride and materialism bred in the law-schools. The building of a convent spacious enough to house a large community was, too, a direct blow in the face of his Lady Poverty; and so the whole affair appeared to him a dire betrayal of his cause.

He would not even enter the doors of the building, but sought refuge in the house of the Dominicans

in the city, and thence, with something of his old impetuosity and imperious temper, he called down the curse of Heaven upon Peter, a traitor, as he saw him, to his Order.

But worse was to follow. As he proceeded on his way to Assisi he heard on all sides of changes that had taken place.

Bitter complaints came to him from the lips of friars who, having tried to keep to the spirit of their primitive simplicity, had been hunted out and forced, for fear of persecution, to live among the rocks of the mountain-sides. The majority were against them and against their founder. The demon of revolt had seized the Order in its grip.

A weaker man than Francis would have fought against the flowing tide of change, and in so doing might have wrecked the whole fraternity. He, strong in his utter simplicity, though broken-hearted at what seemed at first an incomprehensible movement of disloyalty to the spirit of the Order, began to realize that some such change was inevitable, and even acceptable, if duly restrained. But there must be a strong hand to rule and guide men who were capable of thus taking the bit into their teeth, and Francis knew that this was not his part to play. He could inspire, he could lead men who followed in the spirit of love and humility; he could not drive or force them against their will. So, in this difficult crisis, he turned in his great humility to the very man whom he might well have blamed for betraying his cause, the great Cardinal, whose love and sympathy for the ideals of Francis were ever at war with his desire for a practical, hard-and-fast

organization, utterly at variance, as it seemed, with those ideals.

The help of Ugolino was obtained in characteristic fashion. Travelling to Rome, Francis sat down on the ground outside the door of the Pope's room, and waited till the pontiff came forth.

"Father Pope, God give thee peace," said the "Little Poor Man."

"God bless thee, my son," replied Pope Honorius. "What can I do for thee?"

"My lord Pope," said Francis, "you are so great, and so taken up with great affairs, that the poor cannot get a chance of speaking to you in time of need."

"You have the cardinals and bishops," mildly the pontiff reminded him, to which Francis replied, "Ah, you would give me many Popes; I only ask for one, from whom I may ask advice and consultation concerning my Order."

"Whom dost thou wish that I should give thee, my son?" asked Honorius.

"Give me," said Francis, "my lord the Cardinal Ugolino."

And so did the great Cardinal of Ostia become the protector of the Franciscan Order, and the organizer of the scattered and disunited fraternity.

As a whole, the Franciscan spirit remained unspoilt by these developments. Some such organization was imperatively necessary if the Order was to carry out the great work of reform that lay before it; and the primitive spirit in which it had been set on foot was, to a large extent, ensured by the reformed Rule upon which Francis insisted at the next General Chapter.

The sentiments, indeed, with which, at the close of that Chapter, ninety brethren went forth to face what they looked upon as certain death, on a mission to the much-dreaded German people, speak clearly enough for themselves.

"We went forth," says Brother Giordano, "to offer ourselves to death; and who can express the charity, patience, humility, and obedience, and the fraternal merriment there was among the brethren at that time?"

But the clouds were still gathering fast, and in darkness and humiliation the cup of suffering had yet to be drained by Francis to the dregs.

CHAPTER XIII: *In the Depths*

His convent Peter founded without gold,
. . . . .
And Francis, his in meek humility.
DANTE'S *Paradiso* (Cary's trans.)

IT was in connexion with that convent at Bologna, built by Peter Stacia, that the troubles that beset Francis at this period were deepened and intensified. It is not certain whether it had been built for a school of theology on the Dominican model, or as a school of law and arts among the many others in that city; but in either case, by providing the means for a life of study and learning, it struck a direct blow at the original Franciscan ideal of poverty and simplicity.

The attitude of Francis to this desire for learning, a desire which is one of the distinguishing features of the "wonderful thirteenth century," is difficult to understand if we have not fully realized the man himself and the circumstances of his time. It was not that he despised book-learning, or disliked scholars as such, for we find him referring to theologians as "lords among men and deserving of homage." He was himself deeply affected, as we know, by the chivalric literature of his age. But his highest inspiration had always been drawn from that sense of personal experience of human life, of social instinct, that comes from an intimate study of mankind, and not from the pages of books. Book-knowledge, it seemed to him, must always be subordinated to spiritual action, and even theological

learning was of small profit as compared with the wisdom of the heart.

It was inevitable too that at this particular crisis the convictions of the founder of the Franciscan Order should be overstated. During his absence in the East movements had progressed which struck at the root of all he held most dear. Brother Elias, now Vicar-General, and Brother Peter of Bologna were not alone in their attempt to introduce an entirely new spirit into the Order. No longer were the brethren to be content to be simple folk, despised for their poverty and quite unable to hold their own against the learned Dominican or the cultivated laymen of their day. They too were to equip themselves with book-knowledge, not because it would help them better to bring the world back to the feet of Christ, but because it would strengthen their own position and self-respect.

This idea of "learning for learning's sake" was hateful to Francis, and calculated, in his eyes, to bring about the ruin of the souls of his friars. When they argued that knowledge was power, he replied, "A man has as much knowledge as he does deeds," and added significantly that "he who relies upon book-learning in the day of sorrow and battle will find his hands empty."

He maintained his reverence for such knowledge as dealt only with heavenly wisdom. We see him, indeed, gathering up the scraps of writing-paper by the roadside, in case they bore upon them the mark of the Divine name, and the expression of wisdom infused by Him. But for the Friar Minor life was to be his college, and the human soul his book; and his

strong opposition to the demand of the brothers for more systematic study was based on his conviction that they were exchanging the wisdom of God for the knowledge of the world.

So misunderstandings arose and conflicts of will. For Brother Elias, who had once seemed to be his closest friend and adherent, was utterly opposed to him in this matter, and would allow books for the use not only of the friars but even of the lay-brothers, and in this he was supported by Cardinal Ugolino.

There is a famous story told of Francis concerning this dispute, which explains better than anything else his personal conviction on the matter.

A young novice, a lay-brother, came to him one day saying: "Father, I very much want a psalter in which to read and study, and Brother Elias, the General, has allowed it to me; but I would gladly have your approval before I use it."

In reply, Francis, brooding sadly over this very question, broke out with passionate words: "Charles the Emperor, Roland and Oliver, and all the paladins and puissant men who were mighty in war, pursuing the heathen with sore sweat and labour even to the death, achieved a victory worthy of remembrance, and at last died in battle, martyrs for the faith of Christ; but now there are many who only for the telling of the deeds they did would have honour and human praise. So also among our own friars are many who by reciting and preaching the work that the saints have done expect to receive honour and praise."

Much abashed, the novice went away, but came back after a few days with the same request.

Crouching over the smouldering wood fire, Francis would not even look at the petitioner, but replied, "Yes, and when you have got the psalter you will want a breviary. And when you have got a breviary you will sit in a high chair like a bishop and say to your brother: 'Bring me my breviary.'" And muttering angrily, "A breviary indeed: bring me a breviary!" he made as though he would cast ashes upon his head.

The poor young novice was departing in dismay when the natural sweetness of Francis' nature reasserted itself. "Come to me, brother," said he kindly, "and let us reason out this thing together. I too was once tempted to have books in my possession, and while I was pondering on God's will as to this matter I took a book in which was written the Holy Gospels and prayed that in the first opening of the book I might learn His will. And in the first opening of the book I read these words: 'Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables.'"

Then, as the novice again prepared to depart with what resignation he could muster, Francis added gently, "Many there are who are fain to exalt themselves unto knowledge; but he will be blessed who maketh his mind to be barren for the love of God."

For some months the novice endured the deprivation of the coveted book; but he was still unable to judge between the experimental knowledge beloved of his master and the book-learning beloved by his brethren; so he sought Francis once more, and found him standing at the door of his cell.

Once again he petitioned, repeating that his minister had given him leave.

The face of Francis darkened, and he turned away, saying briefly, " Go, then ; act in this matter according to your minister."

But the lay-brother had not gone far when Francis hurried after him, and, kneeling at his feet, said : " Brother, I have done wrong in giving you this permission ; for whosoever would be a true Friar Minor must have, according to the Rule, nothing but a tunic, cord, and breeches, and, for those who need them, shoes."

And so the novice went sorrowfully away.

In this matter of Franciscan schools, however, the great Cardinal Ugolino was dead against the founder of the Order. While the friars had preached nothing but the way to attain Christian conduct, ignorance of theology mattered little ; while they had been few in number, and mostly men of great sanctity and spiritual wisdom, it mattered less. But now there was actual danger, in so large and mixed a body, of their preaching heresy through sheer lack of learning.

There was also a crying need of theological colleges for the friars, in order to counteract the unsound teaching of the universities of that day ; and it was for this purpose that the convent at Bologna, the most important centre of university life in Italy, had been built. And thither, in a last desperate fight against the new learning he abhorred, came Francis, preaching in the open squares, and astounding the intellectuals by the extraordinary insight, eloquent wisdom and vast spiritual experience of

one who looked like the shabbiest and most insignificant of wandering friars.

At this crisis there steps upon the stage of the drama of Francis' life a man who, by his singular gifts of character and intellect, was to afford the solution of this problem of how to reconcile conflicting ideals.

Among those who had gone forth to preach the Gospel in heathen lands after the Chapter of 1219 had been five friars, who after various adventures, had made their way to Morocco, the home of Mohammedanism. There, with less discretion than zeal, they had denounced the Prophet of Islam even in the mosques dedicated to his worship, and soon found themselves in prison. At first their captors were mindful to deal gently with them, and would have sent them in safety out of the country; but the brothers escaped from their guard, and returning to the city appeared again before the doors of the mosques, and called upon the Moslems to renounce Mohammed.

This time they were taken and tortured, and when upon the rack were offered life and compensation if they would deny their faith. Their only reply was to sing the praises of Christ, and call upon their executioners to do the same. So, in the simplicity of faith and zeal, they were beheaded, and set the seal of the blood of martyrs upon the Franciscan cause. Their bodies were thrown outside the city wall, but their bones were secretly taken from there by the Spanish prince Don Pedro, then a resident at the Moorish Court, and reverently buried in the Church of the Canons Regular at Coimbra in Portugal.

"Now can I say in truth that I have five brothers!" cried Francis with characteristic joy when he heard of the martyrdom; and it was not long before the seed of persecution bore fruit.

A learned young canon of Coimbra, noted as much for his wisdom as for his humility, had heard the story of the martyrdom, and had prayed long before the martyrs' tomb. Thence he had gone to the Franciscan friars who lived outside the city gate, and asked to be admitted into their Order, and to be sent to preach the Gospel to the Moors. In him Francis recognized a true knight of chivalry; he was soon to find in him the man who should solve the troubled question of the Franciscan schools.

In those first days none saw in Anthony of Padua, the future saint and mystic, anything but a simple friar with a zeal for martyrdom. This was balked at the outset by the shipwrecks and frail bodily health that drove him to Italy, where he attended the General Chapter of the friars in 1221, and was sent to Lombardy as an insignificant member who, being in priest's orders, would be useful to dispense the sacraments in some lonely spot high up in the hills.

Hence, from his hermitage at San Paola in the mountains of the Romagna, Anthony was summoned some months later to be present with the other friars at an ordination ceremony. As they sat at their evening collation with some learned Dominicans as their guests, the brother guardian asked one of the latter to give them an address upon heavenly things. But as each of the brothers held his peace, Anthony was bidden to say a few simple words such as befitted an unlettered friar. In vain he begged

to be excused, but when he could no longer avoid the task he rose in their midst, and with the utmost modesty delivered an oration of such power, fervour, and deep learning that his audience was stricken dumb with amazement.

From that time Anthony was recognized as the greatest preacher of his day, uniting, as he did, the fervour and inspiration of Francis with the thorough knowledge of the best-trained thinkers and writers of the Church. The Romagna, riddled as it was with heretical sects, became at once the scene of his labours, and few indeed were they who could withstand the power of his eloquent tongue.

Legend shows us the very fishes of the seashore rising from the waters to listen to his wonderful discourses, and the countryside was soon ringing with the stories of the miracles wrought by his true and ardent faith. This alone would have drawn Francis to him, and he offered no opposition when Anthony of Padua was appointed Reader of Theology at the school of Bologna.

" It pleases me," wrote Francis, " that you should read sacred theology to the brethren so long as on account of this study they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer as is ordained in the Rule."

And so the problem was solved at last ; for the mystic, with his deep insight into the spiritual world, who could yet combine with this the possession of book-knowledge in its highest and most complete form, was the man above all others to reconcile the primitive Franciscan ideal of holiness with the newer spirit of learning for which the medieval world was craving in the thirteenth century.

CHAPTER XIV: *On the Heights*

> On the hard rock
> 'Twixt Arno and the Tiber, he from Christ
> Took the last signet, which his limbs two years
> Did carry. DANTE, *Paradiso* (Cary's trans.)

WE are standing now on the threshold of that mysterious occurrence in the story of Francis which was to mark him out throughout the centuries, in marvellous manner, as the fellow-sufferer, as well as the herald, of the Master he so tenderly loved. It had always been the Passion of Christ that had drawn him to His side, with tears of pity and gratitude and admiration, even in the earliest days of his following; now in the latter years, when his work was well-nigh done, the privilege, not to be explained or accounted for, of knowing in an extraordinary and intimate fashion the literal meaning of the Wounds of Christ was to be his.

Like most great events, the revelation was preceded by a time of acute trial. We have seen how the rebellion of his friars against the primitive simplicity of their Rule, the disloyalty of some of his nearest friends, the changes in the Franciscan ideals, had saddened and depressed him till the popularity of the Order seemed to him nought but a curse.

"Would there were fewer Friars Minor!" he had cried at this time, "and that the world, seeing a Friar Minor but rarely, should wonder at their fewness!"

Yet even in that hour of darkness the beauty of

his own character was fast developing. A spark of his old fiery temper, a determination to be the leader of enterprise as in the days of his arrogant youth, is seen in his reply to a friar at this time. The brother had urged him to attend a Chapter in order to oppose some of the recalcitrants. Francis was unwilling to have anything to do with them; the brother hinted that absence was not the way to enforce one's will.

The founder's words blazed forth: "If I come to the Chapter I will show them what my will is!"

But soon there asserted itself the spirit of the new and older Francis, controlled and disciplined by that same will.

"I will show you," said he, "what I conceive to be the state of a true Friar Minor. If the brethren should move me, with great devotion, to go to the Chapter, and then to announce to them the Word of God, I ought to rise and preach to them as the Word is given me. Now suppose when the preaching is ended they all cry out upon me: 'We will not have you to reign over us; you have no eloquence, you are too simple and unlettered, and we are ashamed to have as our superior one so simple and despised.' And they cast me out in disgrace. Then it seems to me that if I do not rejoice when they cast me out with shame, I am no true Friar Minor."

It was in this spirit that he revised the Rule of his Order, a Rule which, while safeguarding the principle of poverty, and surrendering nothing of the essentials of the original, is gentler and more tolerant in tone, and free from the almost fierce idealism of the earlier document.

His active work for the Order was fast nearing its completion, and though he still was sometimes saddened in mind by the defections of some of his children, a message of comfort from his Divine Master had lightened the burden of his soul.

"O poor little man, why are you distressed? Have I so set you a shepherd over My religion that you know not that I am its chief Protector? I set over it you, a simple man, to the end that those who will may follow you in those things I work in you for an example to others. It is I Who have called them; I Who will keep and feed them; and I will make good the falling away of some by putting others in their place, in such wise that if these others be not born, I will cause them to be born. Be not, therefore, perturbed, but work out thy own salvation; for even if the faith should come but to three members, yet through My gift shall it remain unshaken."

So the trial of Francis, the temptation to repine at the apparent failure of the literal fulfilment of his ideal, left him more courageous, more joyous, more humble; and prepared him for that mysterious seal of his Master's approbation that is known throughout the centuries as the *Stigmata* of St Francis.

Ever since his return from the East he had been broken in body, and subject to the most distressing types of sickness, and now that he was unable to undertake long journeys and arduous preaching he retired to a hermitage near the little town of Grecchio, that lies perched like a falcon's nest among the steep mountains above the valley of Rieti. There in his rocky cave he spent most of the winter of 1223 and

the spring of 1224, passing his days in prayer and meditation, but issuing forth occasionally when the cry of humanity came like an echo to his ears, bringing happiness and peace to the mountain-folk who dwelt in the villages round about his refuge. In the caves near by some few of his brethren gathered round him, among them being Brother Leo, that " little sheep of the Lord," whom Francis so tenderly loved, and who in return loved and served him with a devotion " passing the love of women."

To these gentle souls it seemed as though each day saw their father becoming more and more like the Master they all were proud to serve, in gentleness, in self-effacement, in humble, childlike joy of heart. And still, as of old, he would teach them the oft-forgotten lesson taught by his Lady Poverty under the form of parable.

He had come forth from his hermitage on Easter Day to find the little refectory of the brothers set out with unwonted luxury. A friend had lent them cloths and glass and fine dishes for the occasion, and they had thought it no harm for once to make a fine display. The Francis of old would have reproved sharply, would possibly have refused his presence. The Francis born anew in prayer and solitude quietly withdrew, and, waiting till the brothers, weary of waiting, had seated themselves at the table, appeared at the door with pilgrim's hat and staff, crying, " For the love of God, brothers, give alms to this poor sick pilgrim."

They called to him to enter, and Francis, doing so, took a dish from the board and sat humbly upon the ground to eat.

" Now," said he to the shamefaced brothers, " am I seated like a true Friar Minor. But when I saw the table so well set up and adorned, I could not believe that it was the board of men who beg their bread from door to door. For more than all others should we rule ourselves upon the pattern of the poverty of God's Son."

It was in the September of 1224 that the event took place which was " to set indelibly the seal of his life's passion upon the body of Francis, as it was already set upon his soul." [1]

The scene of the mystery was Monte Alvernia, that retreat given him years before by one who loved and understood him well.

Here the mountain-sides had lost their veil of foliage and lay bare and rocky under the sky ; and the great silence of the hills was broken only by the cry of hawk or falcon as it swooped upon its evening meal. Here stood the little group of huts where dwelt his tiny band of intimates ; and at first the cell of Francis stood a little distance off. But about the middle of the August of that year Francis chose another retreat, out of earshot of the brethren's call, and gave strict orders that none were to approach him save only Leo himself, who might bring him bread and water once a day, and say matins with him at midnight. Even this intercourse was restricted, for the spot chosen was a jutting ledge of rock, cut off from the mountain-side by a deep chasm, and connected with it only by a wooden plank ; and this plank was never to be crossed by Brother Leo unless Francis replied to his signal of, " Lord, open

[1] Father Cuthbert, *Life of St Francis.*

The Stigmata

Thou my lips," with the countersign, "And my mouth shall show forth Thy praise."

Here, on this perch of rock, the soul of Francis, in silence and solitude, wrestled with the powers of evil, and came forth triumphant.

It is not for us to tread upon that holy ground, nor to try to peer into the mysterious converse of the servant with his Master, except in so far as we may follow the example of the falcon who watched over his prayer from his nest above, and fluttered against his cell at midnight till he rose for matins. But Brother Leo, wistfully wondering what this heavenly converse might portend, though he dared not intrude upon that solitude, saw and heard strange things upon that mountain-side; and he noted that when Francis called him, as sometimes happened, to his side, it was always of the Passion of His Lord, and of those Five Wounds of His, that Francis would speak and hear.

The vision of that September day (September 14, the Feast of the Holy Cross) in the year 1224 must be told in the awestruck words of the writer of the *Fioretti*, which are based upon the description given by Brother Leo; and Leo had it from the lips of the blessed Francis himself.

It came to pass that the next day, being the Feast of the Most Holy Cross, in the middle of September, St Francis prostrated himself in prayer before the opening of his cell, and inclined with his face toward the East according to his wont, praying thus:

"O my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray Thee to grant me two graces before I die; the first, that in my lifetime I may feel in my soul and in my body, as far as is possible, all the pain and grief which Thou, O sweet Lord, didst feel in Thy most

bitter Passion; the second, that I may feel in my heart, as far as is possible, that excessive love by which Thou, the Son of God, wert impelled willingly to sustain so great suffering for sinners."

And he remained a long time thus in prayer. And having received this promise St Francis began to contemplate with the deepest devotion the Passion of Christ and His infinite charity, and the fervour of devotion waxed so within him that through love and compassion he was wholly changed unto Jesus. And, being inflamed by this contemplation, on the same morning he saw coming from Heaven a seraph with six fiery and resplendent wings; and approaching him with great speed, so that he could discern him clearly, and know certainly that he had the form of a man crucified, and that his wings were so disposed that two extended themselves above his head, two stretched themselves in the act of flight, and two covered his whole body.

Seeing this, St Francis was much afraid, and filled at the same time with joy and grief and admiration. He had the greatest joy at seeing the gracious aspect of Christ, who appeared to him so familiarly, and looked upon him so graciously: but on the other hand, seeing Him nailed to the Cross, he had immeasurable grief and compassion. . . .

The whole mountain of Alvernia then appeared burning with resplendent flame, which shone forth and illuminated all the mountains and the valleys around, as though the sun were risen upon the earth. And owing to the splendour of this light, which shone through the windows of the hostelries of the country round, certain muleteers who were going into Romagna rose with haste, believing that it came from the rising of the sun, and saddled and loaded their beasts; and as they journeyed along they saw the light cease and the natural sun rise. . . .

Then this wonderful vision disappeared, after a great space of time and of secret converse, leaving in the heart of St Francis an excessive ardour and flame of divine love, and in his flesh a marvellous image of and resemblance to the Passion of Christ. For in his hands and feet there immediately began to appear the marks of the nails, in the same manner as he had seen them in the flesh of Jesus

> Christ crucified, who had appeared to him under the form of a seraph, so that his hands and feet appeared to be pierced through the middle with nails, the heads of which were in the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet, and the points came out again in the back of the hands and the feet. . . . Similarly, in his right side there was the appearance of a wound made by a lance. . . . And although those most holy wounds, inasmuch as they had been impressed on him by Christ Himself, gave the greatest joy to his heart; nevertheless, in his flesh, and to his bodily sensation, they gave intolerable pain.

And when those days of ecstasy, of spiritual joy that no agony of body could mar, were over, Francis returned, riding upon an ass, to St Mary of the Angels.

CHAPTER XV: *The Hymn of Joy*

Be Thou blessed, O Lord, with all things created,
Especially my Lord and Brother, the Sun.

ST FRANCIS, *Canticle of the Sun*
(trans. by J. S. Roberts)

WHEN Francis had made, with slow and painful steps, that steep ascent to the lonely heart of Monte Alvernia, he had seemed to those he left behind a wasted old man, prematurely aged and broken in body and mind, in spite of the fact that he was not yet fifty years of age.

Great then was their surprise to find when he appeared once more among them that an interchange of spirit had come upon him. This was even more miraculous than those strange marks of the Cross that were impressed on his hands and feet and side. His body, it is true, was torn by the agony of those throbbing wounds so that he could scarcely stand upright; but his heart was once more that of a joyous youth, with a soul so full of vigour and gaiety that he could scarcely restrain himself from shouting aloud his happy song.

Nothing would do but that he should set off at once on a pilgrimage of preaching that should gather in the souls of men by the sheer fervour and vigour of its presentment. He could not set his swollen feet to the ground, but there was the little grey ass upon which he had made many a journey already; and the brothers had, perforce, to look on in dismayed silence as their father once more set forth,

reminding them gaily that it was due to the honour of a true knight that he should be brave in the bearing of pain.

"He knows that his end is near; he would use every day he hath left for the Master's work," they murmured among themselves, and added sadly, "But what will become of us when he is gone?"

One there was, Brother Elias, Vicar-General of the Order, who watched over Francis with a sad foreknowledge of the end. He had been warned, it is said, in a dream that the father had less than two years to live; and Elias, with all those faults that were to dim the glory of the Order for a while in the days to come, had at least the quality of reverent affection for his friend and master.

It was Elias then who besought Francis to take some little care of his body, that "Brother Ass" of whose failing strength he was so forgetful; and when he could not prevail with him it was Elias who arranged that Cardinal Ugolino's more weighty word of entreaty and command should bring the dying Saint to Rieti, where there was skilled medical treatment to be had. It was indeed high time, for the inflammation of the nerves of his weakened frame had spread to his eyes, and he suffered intense pain even in the dimmest light.

Yet it was with the dawn of a great peace shining upon his wasted face that Francis set out upon that journey; and, passing from the Portiuncula, reached by slow degrees the convent of San Damiano, scene of his boyish fervour, where now abode the Lady Clare and her companions. It was but a short distance, yet it was a suffering and dying man who

was carried into the convent garden by four of his best-loved brothers.

Yet, though the woman's heart of Clare was torn with grief at the sight of his torture of pain, she understood better than the keen-eyed Elias or the gentle Leo that look of joy that lighted up the twisted features and the dim eyes. They loved his broken body, she recognized and loved the valiant soul therein ; and bending over him as he lay blind and broken on the ground she heard from his own lips the mysterious dealings of God with him, and rejoiced at what he told her.

But soon it was evident that sore bodily trials were at hand, and that he was far too ill to proceed upon his journey. Knowing how he loved best to lie, Clare made them build for him in the garden a hut of wattles, such as he and the first brothers had inhabited in the early days of the Order ; and there he was laid to rest for the night. The weary brothers were soon fast asleep, and even Clare, fervently praying yonder in the convent chapel, knew nothing of the mental as well as physical suffering that night brought to the servant of Christ.

For as the agony of nerve pain increased, total blindness followed, with such intense suffering of mind that the courage of the Saint began to fail. In such a state of physical and mental tension trifling annoyances become unbearable burdens ; and it was the pattering of little grey mice over his helpless limbs and pain-drawn face that tempted Francis to feel an impatience and self-pity that were altogether strange to him. In sore grief and trouble he called upon his Master for help, and immediately came the

response. Within his weary soul he heard the Divine question: "Tell me, brother Mine, if one should give thee in return for thy infirmities and pains a treasure so vast and precious that the whole earth by comparison would be as nothing to it, wouldst thou not be exceeding glad?"

To which he made answer: "Such a treasure, my Lord, would indeed be precious and most exceedingly desirable."

"Then," said the voice, "be glad, brother Mine, in thy weakness, and make merry in thy sufferings; and for the rest, be thou assured of My kingdom, even as if thou wert already there."

Then silence reigned in a transfigured world. And Francis with a new lightness of heart thought no more of his weary pain, but welcoming with voice and gesture the tiny furry creatures who scampered about him, knew himself once more a part of earth's loveliness, and akin to all those who breathed its life. With almost sightless eyes he watched gladly for the dawn; and when the first rays of light rose over the grey line of hills his heart throbbed out with joy a song of welcome to the sun and to all created things.

And so when the brothers awoke from sleep and went with anxious faces to see how their sick father fared, they found him radiant, singing his *Benedicite* with all the joy of a youth upon the morning slopes of the hills.

"Why are you so glad?" they asked him wondering, and the glad voice, weak with suffering, answered:

"My brother, if the Emperor promised his kingdom to one of his servants, should not that man be

glad? I indeed then should rejoice in my weakness, and be comforted in my Lord, because of the great favour He hath shown to me. And therefore will I sing a new song concerning those creatures of my Master which serve our daily needs."

Thus was given to the world that wonderful earth-song of Francis, sung in Italian dialect to a native melody, which ranks in its own degree with the great drama of Dante, the epic that did more than any political effort could do to make a nation one.

Not only to Italy did it carry the message of universal fatherhood and kinship of creation, but wherever the name of St Francis has been whispered throughout the centuries the spirit of this lyric of "praise of created things" has brought its tidings of joy of life, of the secrets of the earth, of wind and weather, that make glad the living, pulsing heart, and turn Death from a grim skeleton into a loving, smiling friend and sister. It was the summing up of the message of the life of Francis, the secret of his joy, the cause of his triumph over utmost pain and humiliation; and had he given no other message to the world than this, he had yet earned the affection and reverence of a multitude of true lovers.

Here beginneth the Praise of Created Things which the blessed Francis made to the praise and glory of God when he lay sick at San Damiano

O Highest, Almighty, Excellent Lord,
Thine be the praise, the glory, the honour and all benediction.
To Thee, O Highest, alone they belong,
And to name Thee no man is worthy.

Be Thou blessed, O Lord, with all things created,
Especially my Lord and Brother, the Sun,
For by his dawning Thou lightenest our darkness;
Beautiful is he, and radiant with mighty splendour:
Of Thee, O most High, he beareth the token.

Praised be Thou, O Lord, for Sister Moon and the Stars,
For that Thou madest them clear, precious, and lovely.
Praised be Thou, O Lord, for our Brother the Wind,
For air and cloud and sunshine and every weather
Whereby Thou givest Thy creatures their sustenance.

Praised be Thou, O Lord, for Sister Water,
Our helpmate, lowly and precious and pure;
Praised be Thou, O Lord, for our Brother the Fire,
Whereby Thou sheddest Thy light on darkness,
For he is comely and pleasant and mighty and strong.

Praised be Thou, O Lord, for our Sister the Earth,
That as a mother sustaineth and feedeth us,
And after its kind bringeth forth fruit
And grass and many-coloured flowers.

This was not quite the end of his song; for while he still lay at San Damiano, nursed by Clare and the brethren, in sore pain of body, but great joy of soul, he heard that a furious quarrel had broken out in Assisi between the Bishop and the magistrates or council of the city. The former had excommunicated the magistrates, and these officials had retaliated by forbidding the citizens to have any business dealings with the Bishop's Court.

So Francis summoned Brother Pacifico, sweetest singer among the brethren, and bade him call the citizens together to the palace of the Bishop, and repair thither with his companions; and when this

was done they sang before the rival parties the Song of Francis, adding thereto his latest verse :

Praised be Thou, O Lord, for them that for Thy love
forgive,
And undergo tribulation and weakness,
Blessed are they that shall in peace sustain,
For by Thee, O Most High, shall they be crowned.

And it came to pass that when they heard this song the heat of passion died within their hearts, and they wept tears of penitence, and gave to each other the kiss of peace.

One more verse was added to the song when Francis knew that within two years at most his work would be done :

Blessed be Thou, O Lord, for our Sister, Bodily Death,
From which may no man that liveth escape ;
Woe unto them that shall die in deadly sin ;
Blessed they that shall conform to Thy most holy will,
For them the second death harmeth not.
Praise and bless our Lord and thank Him
And serve Him with all lowliness.[1]

So in his joyous simplicity of heart it seemed to Francis that the whole world might be converted by the power of song. Preaching was to be concluded with this canticle ; and the brothers, after they had sung this " Praise of God's Creatures " were to say : "We are the Troubadours of God, and because we have sung to you we ask now a reward ; and our reward will be that you all abide in true penitence of heart."

Six weeks of suffering and joy passed before Francis was able to be carried forth for the last time from the quiet shades of San Damiano along the

[1] *Canticle of the Sun.* Translated by J. Slingsby Roberts.

road to Rieti. Before he reached the city, however, his strength again failed him, so that they bore him into the shelter of the priest's house at San Fabiano, near the outskirts of the city. And this place became the scene of one of those charming legends which, founded as they are on fact and miracle, have grown up in the *Fioretti* round the name of the Saint.

> Now the city folk [of Rieti] coming to know that he was gone to the said church, ran together for to see him, in such sort that the vineyard of the church was spoiled altogether, and the Grapes of it were all plucked; whereof the priest was sore grieving in his heart, and repented him that he had received St Francis into the church. The thought of the priest being revealed of God unto St Francis, he let call him and said:
>
> "Dear Father, how many measures of wine doth this vineyard yield thee, the year it yields its best?"
>
> And he answered: "Twelve measures."
>
> Then said Francis: "I pray thee, Father, that thou endure patiently my sojourn here for a few days, because I find here much repose; and let whoso will pluck of the grapes of this thy vineyard for the love of God and me, His poor little one; and I promise thee, on the part of my Lord Jesu Christ, that it shall yield thee twenty measures every year."
>
> The priest confided in the promise of St Francis, and liberally gave up the garden unto all that came to him. And it was a marvel to see how the vineyard was all plucked and spoilt, so that scarce any clusters of grapes were found left.
>
> The time of the vintage came; and the priest gathered in such bunches as remained, and put them in the vat and trod them out, and according to the promise of St Francis got thereout twenty measures of the best wine.

At Rieti, where he was at length carried thither, the bodily agony of Francis was much increased. There, at the wish of Brother Elias, to which he

submitted with the humility of a child, he underwent the torture of cauterizing on his face and through both ears. From the sight of the iron heating in the fire his highly strung organization shrank for the moment; but, forcing himself to look steadily upon it, he said with his courageous smile of old: "O Brother Fire, most noble and useful of created things, be courteous to me now, for I have always loved and will love thee for love of thy Creator."

The friars could not endure the sight of the operation, and fled from the room till all was over. But Francis received them on their return with gentle rebuke. "Why did you go away? In truth I tell you I felt not any pain or sense of heat, so that if I be not well burned, he may burn me again if he will."

The treatment, however, brought but small relief; and while the patient, with high heart, was planning new expeditions to call back the ignorant and careless to the paths of right living, or to stir up the slow of heart to give praise to God, the physicians of Rieti were advising that he should be taken to Siena, that city of the hills noted for the skill of its men of medicine.

Once more, then, the weary journey was resumed; but on the road there occurred an incident that, unaccountable in itself, adds one more touch of romance to the story of Francis' life.

As they passed along the high road that leads through Tuscany to Siena, three poor women met the little procession, and, bowing low to Francis on his litter, greeted him with the words:

"Welcome hither, my Lord Poverty!"

The salutation filled the Saint with overpowering joy, recalling as it did the very mainspring of life to him; then, remembering how poor the women looked, he bade his doctor hurry back to them with an alms. This was done, but when, on returning to Francis, the little band of men looked back along the straight white road, the women had vanished from their sight. It was left to a later age to see in them the three evangelical virtues, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience; but the whole incident brought great comfort to the suffering Francis.

CHAPTER XVI: *St Francis Falls on Sleep*

Scarce had the voice of Francis ceased for ever than the air was filled with sound . . . it was those faithful friends of St Francis, the larks, who came to bid him their last farewell.

JÖRGENSEN, *Vie de S. François*

SIENA brought no relief of body to the suffering Francis, but much happiness of soul. The citizens flocked round him with the tender love of his own children, proud if they might touch his threadbare habit or catch a glimpse of his sweet and joyous smile. One who brought a fine pheasant, fluttering uneasily in his basket, was told that the father was busy discussing a problem of religion with a learned Dominican friar.

"I have brought him a bird to tame for his amusement, and will wait till he is ready," said the countryman sturdily: and when Francis had settled the difficulty, not by knowledge of theology, but by vision of soul, he turned gladly, with his charming gesture of understanding and affection, and receiving his gift, soothed the bird to rest in his arms.

But he grew rapidly weaker at Siena, so that the brothers gathered round him, and fearing that the end was near begged for some last word or "testament" which they might hand on with his memory to those who came after.

And so, lying on what seemed his deathbed, Francis, like St John of old, gave his threefold message to his children.

"Write," he said to Brother Benedict, "how I do bless all my brethren who are in our Order or who

shall ever come into it even to the end of the world. And since I cannot speak much, I will lay open my message to all the brethren present and to come in these three words: that in memory of my blessing and last will they love one another as I have loved them. That they for ever love and observe our Lady Poverty. And that they always be loyal and subject to the prelates and clergy of Holy Mother Church."

He was not to be allowed to die at Siena, however. Knowing that the men of Assisi would justly claim him for the city of his birthplace, and caring too for the unspoken wish of Francis himself, came Brother Elias, with masterful arrangements, and carried the dying Saint along the weary road to the town among the hills across the plain. An armed guard accompanied the little cavalcade, for, strange to say, the body of St Francis was held in higher honour now that it was worn out than in its days of vigour; and Perugia, which once had scorned him, was justly suspected of trying to seize his almost lifeless frame that it might add more glory to her city of the hills.

The same thing happened when they approached Assisi, when the citizens flocked with cries of joy to meet the litter of the man they once had stoned. Already in their eyes he was a Saint of God, and in their enthusiasm they would not suffer him to go farther to his own place at the Portiuncula, but conveyed him with tender reverence to the palace of the Bishop. And there for a while Francis was content to rest his weary body, and to reign from his sick-bed; while those who crowded round him treasured the few utterances that fell from his lips. It was

now that he gave to his followers that beautiful picture of the " Father of the Franciscan Family " which he himself so closely resembled, though in his humility he knew it not.

One had asked him what manner of man should he be who should succeed him as the " shepherd of this vast flock " of friars and tertiaries of the Order. And after much thought Francis spoke words to this effect :

" The Father of this Family should be a man of prayer and work, without private attachments ; one who will care no less for the simple and lowly than for the learned and great. He may excel in the gift of learning, but must nevertheless preserve his simplicity to the uttermost. He must abhor money, and should have nothing save a habit and a little book for himself, and a box of pens and a seal for the sake of the brothers. Let him not collect a library, or be given to overmuch reading ; but let him first of all take care to console the afflicted and bring ease to the sick of heart. Let him be tender to all, even to those who have fled from the Order, remembering their overpowering temptations. For to him it belongs to discover the hidden springs of conscience, and to uphold the truth. Yet let not discipline be lost through mistaken indulgence, for while he is an object of love to all, he should be also an object of terror to the wrongdoer. Let him and his associates set their faces sternly against the world's pleasures, and be strong in the face of hardships ; yet genial, receiving all who come to them with holy cheerfulness.

" Behold the General of the Order as he should be."

Meantime he grew steadily worse.

"Tell me," said he one morning to his physician, "what think you of this dropsy of mine?"

The doctor answered, as doctors do, in ambiguous tones. "All will go well with you, by God's grace."

"Tell me the truth," said Francis, "and be not afraid. For by God's grace am I no coward that I should fear death; by the grace of the Holy Spirit within me, I am so made one with my Lord that I am equally content to live or die."

"Then," said the doctor, "I believe your sickness is incurable, and that you will die at the end of September or the beginning of October."

Francis raised his hands to heaven with a cry of joy, "Welcome, Sister Death!"

That night the soldiers keeping watch outside the palace were astonished to hear the voice of the sick man singing the verse in praise of Death from the *Canticle of the Sun*; whereupon Elias, ever conventional of mind, fearing that this might lessen the reputation of the Saint, took upon himself to reprove him, for that he thus openly rejoiced when he should have been preparing for his end.

But Francis answered him roundly: "Leave me, brother, to rejoice in the Lord and in His praises and in my infirmities, for by the grace of the Holy Spirit I am so united to my Lord that by His mercy I can well be merry in the Most High."

"Let the saints sing aloud upon their beds." To none perhaps more than this "dearest Saint of all" do the words of the Hebrew singer of old so fully apply.

Then as the days passed on a great longing came

to Francis to be carried for the last time to that first home of his soul, the Portiuncula ; and so they bore him on his bed along the highroad he had so often tramped with light step and merry heart in the days of old. Half-way down the steep hill he bade them stop and turn his sightless eyes back to the city of his headstrong youth, while in solemn words he blessed Assisi, the place where " God had marvellously shown forth the multitude of His mercies and taken it to Himself."

And so in great peace of mind he lay down to rest in his woodland chapel among the birds and trees he loved.

In San Damiano, so near and yet so completely cut off from him, the Lady Clare, future saint and foundress of her order, who was to uphold the spirit of the true Franciscan through every kind of opposition and discouragement, was rapt in mingled grief and joy for his departing. In the world below, not only the friars but also that great army of the ' Third Order,' the ' tertiaries,' who were striving to live up to the Franciscan ideal in the midst of ordinary life and work, waited anxiously for news of their beloved father's welfare.

One of these, the Lady Giacoma, the only woman besides Clare with whom Francis had ever had intimate friendship, had long awaited the summons that should bring them face to face once more. And about the feast of Michaelmas the summons was sent, and Francis bade her bring to him the materials for the Last Feast as well as for the preparation of his broken body for death. She came, in her loving haste and foreknowledge, before ever

The Blessing of Assisi

the messenger had started on his way, bringing "a gown of grey cloth, a napkin to cover his face, a cushion for his head, wax candles to burn at his bier, and a kind of sweetmeat she had often made for him when he visited her house." [1]

With her sons and her squires came Lady Giacoma, prepared to wait with Francis till the end. For a little he seemed to gather strength again, and their meetings were full of joy and happiness. This was presently shadowed a little by one who told him of the grief of Clare, herself sore stricken by sickness and feeling, in spite of her brave heart, that she who had first claim upon his tenderness was left alone and desolate. At that the gentle heart of Francis was greatly touched, and thinking how best he might comfort this, his dearest child of all, he bade a brother write thus to her:

> I, little Brother Francis, desire to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ, and of His most holy Mother, and to persevere therein unto the end. And I beseech you, my ladies, and I give you counsel that you live always in this most holy life and poverty. And be greatly careful of yourselves, lest by the teaching or counsel of anyone you in any way or at at any time draw away from it.

The words seem cold, a mere reminder of an oft-told tale, but Clare understood, knowing that Poverty, his Lady and hers, makes her demands upon her servants in death as in life. But for her own more private comfort Francis adds tenderly to the bearer of the writing:

"Go and tell Sister Clare to put aside all sorrow

[1] *Spec. Perf.*

and sadness, for though she cannot now see me, yet before her death both she herself and her sisters shall see me and have great comfort of me."

And this was fulfilled in two ways: for not only did the sisters look upon the body of the Saint in the beauty of his death-sleep, but they were to live long enough to see his ideal, his true self, triumph in the world.

Then, surrounded by his brothers, and watched over by the womanly tenderness of Giacoma, Francis prepared to die, as he had lived, in great joyousness of heart. "He bade two of the brethren whom he greatly loved sing to him in loud, exultant voice the verse of the canticle of 'Brother Sun' which declares the praises of God in Sister Death." He himself joined with broken voice in the psalm that followed, beginning: "I cried unto the Lord with my voice"; and according to one account he breathed his last as he reached the final verse, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name." But it is likely that after this outburst of joyful praise he lived long enough to bless his companions one by one, and in the last Breaking of Bread with them to bid them once more love one another.

Then at his own wish they laid him on the lap of Mother Earth, and put upon him sackcloth and ashes, in courteous preparation for the burial; and then, just at the hour of sunset, when the larks were thrilling out their joyous vespers in the fading autumn sky, the long-expected guest entered the lowly door.

"Welcome, Sister Death!" was the glad cry of

Francis at his departing ; and the birds chanted over him their last farewell.

His very burial was a scene of triumph rather than of grief, as thousands flocked to look at the body, lying in a strange, unearthly beauty it had never known in life, and marked with those mystic signs that men now saw openly for the first time. They took him first, as was fitting, to San Damiano, that his ladies might give him their last greeting, and then back to Assisi, to the church of St George, where, some forty years earlier, he had learnt his letters as a little merry boy. And there he awaited the building of that great church that was to be the life-work of Brother Elias, and in after days the centre of a world's homage and reverence.

It was on October 4, in the year 1226, that Francis died ; and within two years he was formally ' canonized,' or declared a saint, by Pope Gregory IX, once his old friend Cardinal Ugolino.

The formal declaration was of course a necessity, but the verdict of the world had gone forth long before.

CHAPTER XVII: *A Pilgrimage to Assisi*

"This place is holy."
ST FRANCIS (of the Portiuncula)

IF one were asked what was the chief work which St Francis performed in his comparatively brief lifetime, one would reply that it was first and foremost the awakening of the world of that day to the spirit of love and joy.

And this was no passing work. As the years passed by the very name of the "Little Poor Man of Assisi" became surrounded by a halo of love and devotion that is, in a sense, the reflection of the spirit spread by him broadcast over the earth. Few saints have evoked anything resembling this strong personal affection felt by those of widely different creeds and temperaments; and none perhaps have so entirely and unreservedly gained the title of the friend of all mankind. And so it has come to pass that while the little town of Assisi and its immediate neighbourhood is a place of pilgrimage for men and women of every race and tongue and religious belief, these countless pilgrims are linked together by a curiously strong bond of mutual devotion to him whose memory is there enshrined.

Very different from what it was in its early days is that locality now, where vast churches and numerous convents mark the spots once haunted by St Francis; but still the ancient spirit of simplicity and prayer and faith survives, and we shall do well to take a brief glance at the chief points of interest there to-day, making our spiritual pilgrimage at

least among those holy memories of the past, if we cannot make it actually on foot.

First, then, let us visit the Portiuncula, where so much of the life of Francis, as well as his last days on earth, was passed.

This lies, it will be remembered, about an hour's walk from Assisi, and is marked by a vast, domed basilica, built by a Dominican Pope, Pius V, out of love for the Order that stood side by side with his own to fight the powers of evil.

In the centre of the nave stands a humble building, entirely enclosed by the great church ; and it is with feelings of awe and devotion that we realize that this is the original chapel of St Mary of the Angels, the " Little Portion " granted to Francis by the sons of Benedict, where the song of the angels was said to have heralded his birth, where he first heard clearly the call to serve his Captain, where St Clare made her religious ' profession,' and where the first tiny band of brothers met and lived together.

No wonder that St Francis wished to die there " because he loved the Portiuncula better than any other place in the world," or that with his last breath he should charge the brothers, " This place is holy ; whatever you ask for fervently here shall be granted to you. . . . Never abandon it. . . . If you are driven out by one door, enter again by another. Let the holiest friars of my Order live here."

In one part of this little church is a tiny chapel, formed out of the room in which St Francis died. This room was originally a small ' infirmary,' or hospital cell ; and it was upon the roof of this that, as St Bonaventura says in his life of the Saint,

" the birds left their nests after sunset at the death of the Saint, and perched on the roof of the little house, in order to say a last farewell to their friend."

Over the altar in this chapel is the beautiful statue of St Francis by della Robbia, said to be founded on a cast taken from the face of the Saint after death. The face, though worn, is young and beardless, and as sensitive as in those early days when he posed as the ' golden youth ' of Assisi.

Outside the church we pass through what was once the wood in which the chapel originally stood, and where Francis had built for himself a hut of wattles. Round it in those days grew a network of thorns and briers; but nowadays it is a garden full of thornless roses, whose leaves are marked with spots like blood. They tell the story that one bitter winter night as Francis lay on the hard ground shivering with cold he was tempted to give up some of his austerities, and to adopt a less severe mode of life. But the answer of the Saint to the voice of the Devil whispering at his ear was to throw off his thin habit and to fling himself naked to the icy blast, among the thorns outside his cell. And behold, the briers turned to thornless rose-trees at his touch, while angels came to his comforting.

Near by there stands a fig-tree, in remembrance of that on which the cicala was wont to sit and sing its matins to those of the Saint.

Leaving the Portiuncula, and making our way toward Assisi, we look north-west to the hill known in his days as the Inferno, the place where criminals were executed and buried, which was chosen by the humble Saint for his own burial-place.

It will be remembered that the body of St Francis had been first laid at San Giorgio, close to his birthplace. But two years later, the day after his canonization in 1228, Pope Gregory IX went with a great procession to the Monte Inferno, and, having changed its name to the Monte Paradiso, laid there the foundation-stone of the great church which the ambition of Brother Elias was to raise to the memory of the lowly founder of his Order. There, when the crypt of the church was finished, they laid St Francis beneath the high altar.

Hence we pass to San Damiano, full of memories of St Clare, and of those earliest days of the call of the future Saint; and to the Chiesa Nuova in Assisi itself, the church which marks the site of the dwelling of Bernadone's son.

Much there is of interest in the medieval town, but we have still one special point of pilgrimage to make. Three miles above the city we climb by a steep path up Monte Subasio to the hermitage known as the 'Carceri,' where the Saint was wont to sojourn, alone as far as earthly companionship is concerned, in closest union with the Master of his heart and soul. A wonderful spot is this, overlooking the very heart of Italy, and full of the true Franciscan spirit of simplicity, devotion, joy, and love. Each of the roughly hewn grottoes has its own story to tell; the very walls cry out the name of him whose prayers they heard; and the humble friary that marks the site seems to convey far more of the "Little Poor Man" who loved to dwell in that spot than the great churches that mark his home and tomb.

CHAPTER XVIII: *The Grey Friars*

To the glory of Jesus Christ and of His poor little one, Francis.
Fioretti

IT would be beyond the bounds of this book to tell of the development of the work of the friars after the death of their founder; but since it is the fashion nowadays to exalt the memory of Francis at the expense of the Order that he created, it is but fair to glance for a moment at the historical importance, as far at any rate as Britain is concerned, of those known in this country as the "Grey Friars."

Their first arrival was in the year 1224, two years before the death of Francis; and England, ever suspicious of the new and the unknown, looked coldly on their coming. In the *Lanercost Chronicle* we read how they landed at Dover, and went to the house of a nobleman to ask for shelter and food. But the nobleman taking them for vagabonds, locked them in his strong-room and went to consult his neighbours as to what he should do with them. The tired friars meantime lay down on the floor and went soundly to sleep. Rising at daybreak they prepared to continue their journey, but found the door locked. Outside a crowd had collected to see them brought forth, and when the door was opened the mayor of the town began to denounce them loudly as spies and robbers. Then one of the friars took off his cord, and handing it to the mayor said with a merry smile: "If we be robbers, here is a rope to hang us with."

The crowd roared at the joke, and the brothers were allowed to go upon their way.

It may have been the members of this same little band, or another, that having made its way to Oxford found themselves hindered and opposed by the bitter opposition of a certain knight. Now when Christmastide came the friars went forth to preach.

> And as two of them were going along through a neighbouring wood, picking their way along the rugged path over the frozen mud and rigid snow, whilst the blood lay in the track of their naked feet without their perceiving it, the younger said to the elder, "Father, shall I sing and thus lighten the journey?" And on leave being granted he thundered forth the hymn *Salve Regina*.
>
> It so chanced that the knight, by no means in good humour with them, was following the same road without their knowledge. Now when the hymn was concluded, as the knight saw the prints of the blood from their naked feet in the wood, he who had been the consoler said, with a sort of self-congratulation to his companion, "Brother, was not that antiphonal well sung?"
>
> Whereupon the knight, breaking in upon their talk, said, "Yes, by the Lord, it was; and may the Lord bless and prosper you, who, like the Apostles, are patient in necessities, and rejoice in tribulation." And at this word he slipped from his horse and asked pardon on his knees for the harsh judgment he had passed upon them.[1]

Such incidents were indeed worthy of the joyous spirit of the founder.

They came to England at a critical period. Those were the days of Henry III, when the feudal system had done its work and was passing away in storm and travail. A new class of citizen, the burgher class, rich tradesmen and merchants, had arisen, and was

[1] Brewer's translation of the *Lanercost Chronicle*.

in open opposition to baron and king. And on every side in the university and the market-place, in the hovel of the town, and the cottage of the countryside, a new spirit of democratic freedom was fast breaking down old traditions and levelling the barriers between class and class.

The immediate accompaniments of this social revolution were discouraging enough. In feudal days the poor had lived for the most part under the protection of the castle or the monastery, and under the well-ordered rule of the monks, especially, their lot had been by no means hard.

But now there began a rush of unskilled labourers to the towns, and there, crowded together in congested areas, they readily became the victims of starvation and disease.

The secular priests of the day were few and unlettered: they earned small respect from their people, and often neglected them both in body and soul. The wealthy merchant, on the other hand, who was content to grind money out of the poor labourer, despised both him and the Church which could not meet his needs.

And the root of the matter lay in the fact that the Church was as much a part of the feudal system as the barons, so that not even such a spiritual pontiff as Innocent III could break a system so intimately bound up with the social order of the time.

But what a Pope could not do was to be done by the sons of the "Little Poor Man" whom Innocent, in his dream, had seen holding up the walls of the tottering Lateran. The friars, by identifying themselves with the social revolution already on foot, were

to save the Church, and to bring their influence to bear upon every phase of society in England.

And in this, as we shall see, we cannot separate the work of the founder from that of the friars, as some have mistakenly tried to do. The more we know of Francis, the more we know of the possibilities and the strength and the meekness of his Order; for both were the outcome of their age.

Let us see what were the most marked features of that age. We find, then, first of all in that mediæval Europe a curious mixture of worldliness and piety. But the latter depended almost entirely upon a new element, the realization of the beauty and attraction of the human side of Christ, the "Poor Man of Nazareth"; and through this was gained an entirely new idea of the Brotherhood of Man.

To live the life of One Who walked this earth with fishermen for His friends and outcasts for His associates became a practical ideal—a test, indeed, of Christianity; for he who most gladly bore the burden of suffering humanity was the best lover and friend of the Master. We have seen how this personal devotion to his Lord was the mainspring of the life of Francis; and we have but to turn to the pages of history to see how far his followers followed in his steps.

We do not look for them, it is true, in the wattled cell of their founder. Their increasing numbers and developing spheres of labour made such a life impossible. As it has been well said by one of their Order[1] in modern days: "We cannot easily imagine

[1] Father Cuthbert.

St Francis lecturing in a university, neither can we imagine the friars spread throughout the earth living permanently in cells of twigs. Yet Francis had, unconsciously to himself, a message for the university, and the cell of twigs was not without practical significance to the friars."

It is in the life of Francis that we see his ideal in its purest and clearest form ; it is in the lives of his followers that we see that ideal carried out to its logical conclusion.

Thus, for them, poverty was sheer joy, something to be gloried in, because Christ was poor. They did not embrace it as a protest against worldliness. Their Rule says expressly : "Let no friar judge those who live delicately or are dressed in soft garments." Indeed, they protested not at all, teaching always by example rather than by precept ; and though they became the social reformers of that age, they brought this about rather by persuasion than by any kind of force.

They lived in communities under one roof, but their friaries were always built of the meanest materials, and in the poorest quarters of the city. Says Brewer :[1]

> In London, York, Warwick, Oxford, Bristol, Lynn, and elsewhere their convents stood in the suburbs, and abutted on the city walls. They made choice of the low, swampy, and undrained spots in the large towns, among the poorest and most neglected quarters. Unlike the magnificent monasteries and abbeys which excite admiration to this day, their buildings to the very last retained their primitive, squat, low, and meagre proportions.
>
> Their first house at their settlement in London stood in

[1] *Mon. Franc.*, i.

the neighbourhood of Cornhill, where they built cells, stuffing the party walls with dried grass.

Near the shambles in Newgate, and close upon the city gate of that name, on a spot appropriately called Stinking Lane, rose the chief house of the Order in England. In Oxford, the parish of St Ebbe's; in Cambridge, the decayed town gaol; in Norwich, the waterside running close to the walls of the town, these are the special and chosen spots of the Franciscan missionary. In all instances the poverty of their buildings corresponded with that of the surrounding district; their living and lodging no better than the poorest among whom they settled.

At Cambridge their chapel was erected by a single carpenter in one day. At Shrewsbury, where, owing to the liberality of the townsmen, the dormitories had been built of stone, the minister of the Order had them removed and replaced with mud. Their meals corresponded with the poverty of their buildings. Mendicancy might encourage idleness, but it also secured effectually the mean and meagre diet of the friars, and kept them on a par with the masses among whom their founder intended them to labour.

Next to their poverty, the friars are remarkable for having preserved to their age, and developed within it, the birthright of joy. Joy was the very essence of the temperament of Francis, and in this respect his mantle had fallen in full measure upon his sons. They knew themselves to be the friends of Christ, and serving Him in liberty of soul; how then could they not be filled with joy? And as they laughed and sang their way through the land in days when men's hearts were beginning to grow embittered by greed of gain and worldly ambitions, they brought to town and countryside a precious gift that was to earn the name of "Merrie England" for the country in days to come. And with joy came also love. For the friar's aim was not to preach

doctrine, but out of pure love, "as a worker ready for the sake of souls,"[1] to take up any work of mercy, whether spiritual or corporal.

Lastly, we find in the Friars Minor a reflection of the spirit of democratic freedom for which the England of those days was calling. The Order was founded on democracy, ruled as it was, not by superiors claiming absolute obedience, but by ministers, who held a position similar to the ruler of the five Italian republics, and were elected only for a period, and by the votes of even the humblest newcomer among the brethren.

They came in a century notable for its intellectual awakening, and we find them taking an eager and prominent part in the university life of their day. When Friar Roger Bacon and Friar Thomas Bungay taught experimental science at the universities, Oxford began for the first time to take its place by the side of Paris or Bologna. Under the influence of the friars the collegiate system developed; and Balliol and Merton Colleges both owe their existence to the suggestions of the sons of Francis.

We find them in a still wider sphere, called upon to play their part in the politics of their day as peacemakers between men and nations.

Thus in 1233 we see Friar Agnellus the Provincial Minister sent by Henry III to the Earl Marshal to try to prevent him from leaguing with the Welsh and stirring up civil war. We find Brother Adam de Marisco acting as secretary to Simon de Montfort, and writing letters on behalf of a poor woman, a poverty-stricken rector, and a runaway friar.

[1] Father Cuthbert, *The Friars.*

Sometimes they were sent on foreign embassies, chosen for the task "because of the courtesy and charm of manner that is born of sympathy," says Professor Little in *The Grey Friars in Oxford*. Some of them were sent for the purpose to that rebellious son of the Church the Emperor Frederick II, on the ground that "the empty-handed traveller may sing in the presence of the robber," as the chronicle quaintly declares.

At other times we find them accused of helping to forward the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, though this they hotly deny in a letter to John of Gaunt written a year later.

But perhaps their most important influence on their age is to be found in the fact that they completely altered the attitude of the medieval world toward the poor and suffering of the earth. Remembering the admonition of the "Poor Man of Assisi" that "they ought to rejoice when they converse with persons who are mean and despised by the world," they went farther still, and "ennobled poverty."

"The oppressed people saw despised poverty exalted on an altar and placed in the glory of heaven."[1] No longer was it something to be looked down upon, when in every rank of society baron, merchant, prince, and peasant were proud to enrol themselves under the banner of Francis as members of his Third Order or 'tertiaries,' and, while living in the world, were bound to honour the poor and to succour every other tertiary, whatever his position, in his hour of need.

[1] Gregorovius.

It was, moreover, the Franciscans, mindful of Clare of Assisi and the holy women of her Order, who did much to raise the medieval ideal of womanhood, which had been somewhat degraded when the unreal light in which chivalry had set it began to fade away. Strictly they taught the sanctity of the marriage bond, and even Chaucer, quick to caricature and mock at the weakness of men, says of his "merye frere"

> He hadde maad ful many a mariage
> Of yonge wommen, at his owne cost.

That is to say, he had paid the expenses of many weddings out of his own pocket in order to settle girls steadily in married life.

In their hands, too, was to a large extent the management of the miracle plays by which unlettered England learnt the truths of religion in those days; and their influence on poetry and literature deserves a chapter to itself.

But some will say: "What then of the degradation of the friars, and of the unworthy character we find assigned to them in the pages of contemporary writers such as Langland and Chaucer? Are they not painted there as lazy impostors and dangerous revolutionists? And are not these records a true picture of their day?"

There are in this popular view of the friars not a few misconceptions to be cleared up. The unscholarly view which makes the socialist John Ball, the instigator of popular revolt, a typical friar overlooks the fact that he was in reality a follower of Wyclif, and more closely allied to his 'poor priests'

than to the orthodox orders of friars. Again, those who take their history from the delightful satires of Chaucer must remember that they tread on perilous ground. They are, indeed, no more likely to get an accurate view of contemporary history than the man who, five hundred years hence, gets his sole impression of present-day events from the caricatures of *Punch*. The very fact that Chaucer thinks it worthy of remark that his friar was afraid of acquaintance with a "lazer or a beggere" shows that he was an exception to the general rule.

The far more severe attack of Langland in his *Piers Plowman* must also be read in its historical perspective. His chief quarrel with them concerns their socialistic tendencies. "They prove," says he, "that all things under heaven ought to be held in common." He curses the Peasants' Revolt, and with it those whom he conceives to have been its instigators; and in this he is upheld by the monastic chroniclers of the time. But we must remember that the monks were ever the enemies of the friars, and were no fair judges of their actions. The very fact of the Franciscans' love of the poor, of their constant denunciation of the tyranny and oppression of the rich, was enough to give their foes a handle against them, and to twist their doctrine of universal brotherhood into one of universal revolt.

There was the motive of jealousy, too, in many of these attacks. The popularity of the friars was enormous, and far outweighed that of any other religious body in England. Even in the days of Wyclif, when deterioration seems to have been most apparent, the people took their side hotly against

the 'poor preachers' sent by him to counteract their influence.

Yet that there was deterioration must be allowed, and this very popularity was often one of its chief causes.

"By a curious contradiction," says M. Jusserand,[1] "their poverty had attracted riches to them, and their self-denial power; the hovels where they lodged at first had become sumptuous monasteries with chapels as large as cathedrals; the rich had themselves buried there, in tombs chiselled with the latest refinements of the florid Gothic."

This is, indeed, the main accusation that Wyclif brings against them, and it was in truth a contradiction of their Rule. Yet in the sixteenth century, at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, they had so far reformed themselves that the commissioners report that at many of their houses the friars held no personal property, that their houses were "the poorest in the town," and that even at Oxford they had had to sell their books to buy bread.

Development must, in fact, bring with it relaxation; and there must have been many unworthy friars among the huge numbers that entered the Order of the Grey Friars. For these reasons alone deterioration was bound to set in; but we must not forget that with the recognition of deterioration came also reform within the Order itself. "Every fresh inroad of the spirit of relaxation was met by an attempt to revive the first simplicity and original poverty";[2] and few orders have been so

[1] Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages* (Fisher Unwin).

[2] Father Cuthbert, *The Friars.*

frequently and drastically purged as that of the Franciscans.

We may mention, in conclusion, one striking contrast to the accusation of Langland made in the fourteenth century as to the friars' contempt of lepers.

In 1631 the friars had met to consider certain important changes in their constitution, when the news came that the great pestilence of that year had broken out and was ravaging town and countryside. Immediately the Chapter broke up, and the friars went forth, two by two, as in the days of Francis, to wage war against the dread invader. Not for two years did the Chapter reassemble; and then it was seen that the numbers of those who had lost their lives in the campaign had left many a seat vacant.

Thus, in spite of calumny from without and treachery from within, the Friars Minor continue upon the road trodden beforehand by their great master, the "Little Poor Man of Assisi"; and often when their hearts are heavy and their shoulders bowed beneath the yoke of service, they must recall the joy that marked the worn features of that broken body as he gazed toward the mountains of God and saw fulfilled his dream of the Brotherhood of Man.

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